

# Program Implementation: Utica and Brooklyn

Summary prepared for the Winning Beginning NY Campaign

New York State has created a robust, nationally recognized Universal Prekindergarten program for 4-year-olds, currently serving about one-quarter of the state's school districts. Studies show that children thrive in UPK, parents endorse it, elementary teachers welcome it, and it's highly effective in school preparation.



New York's UPK classrooms are based in public schools and early childhood programs, such as child care centers, HeadStart, preschool special education programs, and parochial schools. More than half of the state's UPK funds go to community-based organizations, like Brooklyn's Smart Start Early Childhood Center and those used by the Utica City School District's program, both highlighted below.

## Brooklyn Program Serves Diverse Student Body

This briefing is one of a series of papers providing evidence that public-supported early education programs work. Covering both academic research and program implementation, the series is published by Winning Beginning NY, a statewide campaign working to inform policy-makers and the public about the many benefits of early education to children, families and society. The campaign aims to build a broad-based constituency to make investment in early care and education a top public priority in New York State.

**Carolyn Cappizzi and the staff of Smart Start Early Childhood Center in Brooklyn know how to turn language challenges into success stories. Each fall, many of the 70 children who enter the center's Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) program do not speak English.**

**"In our community, we must meet the needs of recent immigrants. There are many Hispanic, Arabian, and Chinese families," says Cappizzi, education director of the program in Bay Ridge, a diverse community of families from a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds.**

The significant language and literacy obstacles the children face each September typically melt away by springtime.

**"We find that by the end of the year, the children are reading with a great command of the English language. That is a key benefit of UPK," says Cappizzi.**

**"We immerse them in reading. And give them so many opportunities to talk. UPK is a critical foundation for them. Without the language-rich setting offered at Smart Start, many children would likely languish in kindergarten and later grades."**



**“Without the language-rich setting offered at Smart Start, many children would likely languish in kindergarten and later grades.”**

Three-quarters of Smart Start’s participants are in the state-funded UPK program. “Ninety percent of the children who are in our program would not be there if families had to pay for it themselves,” says Cappizzi.

The UPK program focuses heavily on developing prereading and premath skills. Smart Start uses The Creative Curriculum® ([www.teachingstrategies.com](http://www.teachingstrategies.com)) as the basis for its UPK program. Teachers individualize the program to ensure each child gains the skills and experiences necessary to learn.

“Using finger plays, songs and poetry, we make sure the children understand a routine and internalize it. This makes it easy for them to catch on to language,” says teacher Mary Lou Coriano.

“Rather than following a rigid schedule, teachers individualize learning pace. We try to find out what the child’s interests are and then build on them,” says Coriano.

Developing the social skills of 4-year-olds plays a large role in the program.

“They learn how to compromise, share, and negotiate. These are important skills that they carry with them for the rest of their lives,” says Cappizzi.

There are other benefits as well. Exposure to a relaxed, multicultural atmosphere helps children adapt later to diverse classrooms. The individual attention and customized curriculum provided by Smart Start teachers help children gain a strong start in school.

Kindergarten teachers love the foundation Pre-K programs provide because the children come to them ready to take that next step, according to Cappizzi. Also, she says, this early start for immigrant children saves the New York City Department of Education money since fewer children will need placement in English as Second Language classes.

One of the most important parts of the Smart Start UPK program is making the children and their families feel at home.

“We’re at the door in the morning to greet the children and their parents,” Cappizzi says. “I think parents from other cultures sometimes do not know what to expect when they come to a school in our country, so we do our best to make them feel welcome. It’s important to keep parents and school connected.”



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## **Utica UPK Classrooms Surround Children With Literacy Lessons**

Everywhere Linda Nichols looks, she sees an opportunity for language and literacy lessons. It could be a door, a cat, a plant, or even a phone number.

“There are so many opportunities to engulf children with literacy,” says the director of Magnet Schools and Early Childhood Programs for the Utica City School District. “And they don’t even realize they’re learning.”

Nichols oversees the district’s 12 UPK classes, which serve about 360 children in childcare centers, parochial schools, and other community settings.

She is passionate about language development, and the former elementary schoolteacher makes sure her teachers—who attend a two-week training “boot camp” every August—follow her lead.

“We want the students to have a seamless curriculum, one with full integration of all disciplines, but centered on language development and literacy.

“So whether the children are studying math, science, or history, every subject will have reading and writing associated with it.”

A prekindergarten teacher could easily get a month’s worth of language and literacy lessons out of Eric Carle’s book *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, according to Nichols.



The popular book follows a hungry caterpillar as it grows from egg to chrysalis to butterfly. The book teaches sequencing, counting, and science—all of which foster language and literacy development.

In the typical Utica classroom, labels abound: the bathroom, the door, the windows. The students wear badges or necklaces with their classroom “job” title spelled out. For example, the child who helps the teacher care for pets sports the badge ANIMAL FEEDER.

“When the children see letters and words over and over, they automatically learn them,” says Nichols. “It’s a good way for the students to discover that linked letters make words, and words have meaning.”

One of the most exciting events for prekindergartners is spelling their names by themselves for the first time, according to Nichols.

In some classrooms, the children “sign in” every day or week. At first they sign next to a picture of themselves with their name spelled out underneath. For most, the “signature” is just a scribble, which is just fine, says Nichols, because it’s the beginning of their writing and literacy understanding.

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By the end of the year, what started out as just a scribble for many, is a name. “Children love to write their name, and they get so excited when they do it,” says Nichols.



Another favorite for children is daily journal writing. The teacher may ask the children to write about a certain topic, like what they did over the weekend or what their favorite animal was following a school trip to the zoo. Some days, they may just write about whatever they feel like.

The “writing” is mainly pictures and scribbles, but it gives the children a sense of pride to write in their own book, says Nichols. By the end of the school year, students often supplement their original scribbles and pictures with letters and words.

Test scores in Utica show the positive effect of the pre-K curriculum. Seventy-two percent of UPK graduates scored above average on the Brigance Test, a kindergarten-level assessment. Another nineteen percent scored within the average range.

For Nichols though, it’s not enough. “I take ‘No Child Left Behind’ literally,” she says. “I need to focus on the nine percent who didn’t score average or above.”

The Center for Early Care and Education, created in 1999, is a collaboration of Child Care, Inc., of New York City and the Albany-based Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy. CECE sponsors Winning Beginning NY, a statewide campaign stressing the importance of quality early care and education to all New Yorkers—children, families, employers, and society at large. The campaign receives support from the Pew Charitable Trusts’ initiative to advance high quality prekindergarten for the nation’s 3- and 4-year-olds through objective, policy-focused research in conjunction with state public education campaigns and national outreach.



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