



The New York City Council,
Committees on General Welfare and Women's Issues
Oversight: Implementation of Early Learn
Monday, October 28, 2013
Testimony by
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Good afternoon Chairs Palma and Ferreras and members of the General Welfare and Women’s Issues Committees. I am Ronald E. Richter, the Commissioner of the Administration for Children’s Services. With me today is Myung Lee, Deputy Commissioner for Early Care and Education. We are pleased to be here before the Council to discuss the implementation of *EarlyLearnNYC*. Early care and education has been an area of intense focus for ACS over the past year, and we are proud of the substantial efforts and significant progress we have made.

Overview of Early Learn:

As the Council knows, New York City oversees the largest publicly-funded early care and education system in the country, where we invest over \$1 billion annually to meet the needs of over 100,000 children. Last October, with the help of the Council and our providers, *EarlyLearnNYC*, a unique, groundbreaking early care and education model that merges child care and early education into a single, seamless system, was implemented city-wide across all five boroughs. *EarlyLearnNYC* marks the first time in nearly fifty years that the City has undertaken to transform the system to bring high quality early care and education to children and families in our lowest income communities. We made this critical investment because studies show that 90% of brain development occurs before the age of five and therefore, we must stimulate young minds as early as possible. This is especially true for children living in our most vulnerable neighborhoods.

A newly conducted study confirmed what researchers showed years ago – that children from professional families are exposed to forty-five (45) million words by the age of four, while children in poverty are exposed to thirteen (13)

million¹. It is therefore unfortunate but not surprising that studies show children from low income communities start kindergarten 12 to 14 months behind their peers from higher income homes². Clearly, this has nothing to do with the intellectual capacity of our young people from lower income communities, but the availability of quality, affordable services in their neighborhoods.

Our City's children and families deserve better. With *EarlyLearnNYC*, our overarching goal is to do better. By investing in children at a young age, we are investing in their future and providing a foundation on which they can build for the rest of their lives. Study after study shows that high quality preschool contributes positively to the growth of cognitive, social, and emotional skills growth for all children but has the greatest impact on children from low-income families. High quality early childhood programs reduce the need for remedial and special education, child welfare involvement and results in lower incarceration rates. Children from low-income families who participate in high-quality early childhood education are less likely to be held back in school and are, in fact, more likely to graduate from high school and go on to become more productive members of their communities.

EarlyLearnNYC provides high quality programming with the help of qualified teachers and best practices that have proven results. All

¹ Todd R. Risley and Betty Hart, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children* (Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes, 1995).

² National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000) *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development. Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds. Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

EarlyLearnNYC programs - center-based and family child care - are required to have developmentally appropriate research-based curricula, to assess the progress that each child is making in that classroom, to support teachers to ensure that they are engaged in meaningful interactions with the children, and to have warm and appropriate settings where children can grow, learn and thrive. In addition, *EarlyLearnNYC* focuses on the whole-child, meaning that all children entering an *EarlyLearn* Center receive a health, mental health and developmental screening to address the needs of each child.

EarlyLearnNYC also provides vital supports for working families in New York, without which many parents could not be a part of the workforce. *EarlyLearnNYC* programs have extended hours: eight to ten hours of service per day which includes nutritious meals and physical exercise. *EarlyLearnNYC* programs also often offer medical and dental support to many of our families. For example, ACS is partnering with NYU's Department of Pediatric Dentistry to provide oral health care for children via mobile services. We know that families play a critical role in a young child's ongoing learning and development. Therefore, all *EarlyLearnNYC* programs must include a family engagement component in their curriculum that is responsive to the diversity of each child's family, regardless of their culture and language.

EarlyLearnNYC sets high standards so that parents can feel confident that regardless of program location, setting or design, their children are receiving quality services. To improve the educational experience of our children and to strengthen the early childhood workforce, we have significantly expanded professional development requirements for the teachers in our programs. We now require and provide funding for twelve days of professional development

for all center-based program staff and six days for those in family child care settings. We also provide customized support to providers who have new requirements to meet. For example, we have created a training and coaching program to support the almost 1,500 home based family child care providers so that they can meet the *EarlyLearnNYC* requirement of using a research validated and developmentally appropriate curriculum in their homes. Additionally, all *EarlyLearn* providers receive monitoring and technical assistance from ACS to support four main areas: Program Design and Management; Education and Disabilities; Family and Community Engagement; and Health, Mental Health and Nutrition. From October 1, 2012 to June 30, 2013, ACS staff conducted over 800 site visits to make sure our programs are providing high quality early education experiences for the City's youngest learners.

Where we are now:

EarlyLearnNYC lays a strong foundation for the future of New York City's children. Since the implementation on October 1, 2012, our staff and providers have worked tirelessly to implement this system transformation. Currently, our 138 contractors are providing services to over 27,000 children in 365 centers and in 1,485 Family Child Care providers' homes across the five boroughs. Our center-based enrollment is at 80% today and ACS continues to work with our providers to ensure that they have the support they need and that families are aware of the nearest *EarlyLearn* Center in their neighborhood.

One reason that enrollment is lower than we expected is that our providers are struggling to connect with the families who meet the very specific eligibility criteria required of their particular modality of care. To address this issue, ACS

launched an awareness campaign - a citywide effort to familiarize low income parents with *EarlyLearn NYC* and increase enrollment of families who are eligible for or are receiving subsidized child care from the City. The campaign consisted of advertisements in 144 bus shelters and 278 check-cashing locations across the city in July and August to get children enrolled by September and included a texting feature to better communicate with families who may need our services. By texting *EarlyLearn* to 877-877, our families can get help locating *EarlyLearnNYC* programs in their community and get information on upcoming events and child care options. To date, we have over 800 subscribers and that number grows every day. We continue to partner with the Human Resources Administration (HRA) to increase outreach to parents on public assistance through staffed tables and distribution of campaign materials at HRA Job Centers. This past summer, ACS also created and issued *EarlyLearnNYC* marketing materials such as posters, flyers, and brochures to all *EarlyLearn* programs to use for recruitment and marketing in their community. Additionally, ACS conducted a targeted mailing campaign to over 36,000 cash assistance eligible families and NYCHA residents with children ages six weeks to five years of age to educate them about *EarlyLearnNYC*.

We understand there have been substantial changes to the early care and education system in our City, and we continue to seek new ways to support and communicate with our providers. ACS hosted “Enrollment Summits” and three “Budget Talks” for *EarlyLearn NYC* contracted agencies this past February which provided an opportunity for directors to learn more about the important role that *EarlyLearn* programs can play in maintaining funding for an early childhood contracted system in New York City. These sessions explained how

NYC's subsidized child care system of vouchers and *EarlyLearn* contracted programs is funded. Feedback from the attendees was positive and over 165 *EarlyLearn* directors and fiscal officers attended the talks.

Deputy Commissioner Myung Lee also conducts listening tours and other regularly scheduled meetings to hear directly from the *EarlyLearn* directors and other staff and get their perspectives on the challenges and opportunities in running early childhood programs in New York City. I host recurring meeting with advocates and providers, and have ensured that early care and education representatives have a presence on my Advisory Board, which meets quarterly.

ACS partners with private foundations, academia and businesses in the private sector to ensure that our children are prepared for success in school and in life. ACS has secured \$685,000 in private funds from The Robin Hood Foundation, The Early Care and Education Fund, Casey Family Programs, and the Shoolman Foundation. We are working with partners such as MDRC, Bank Street College, NYU and Columbia University on initiatives that will further strengthen the field and support our children. Among the collaborations are:

- A pilot study with MDRC to implement an early math curriculum;
- Working with National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia University to design and implement a coaching model to better support our teachers;
- A three year professional development initiative to advance the quality of care for children in all 1,485 family child care providers;
- Scholarships for *EarlyLearn* directors to obtain the Children's Program; Administrator Credential Program and 18 credit graduate

level program in Early Childhood Leadership and Management offered through CUNY's School of Professional Studies. To date, forty-eight directors have completed the program; and

- A two year project to help *EarlyLearn* providers develop and use assessment tools, data, and management reports to increase quality programming at their centers.

Our partnerships and pilot programs allow us to identify the kinds of support that our children and providers need while also giving the directors and teachers an opportunity to increase their capacity to influence child development and learning in meaningful, positive ways.

Conclusion:

I know that this year has presented significant challenges. This system transformation has required, and will continue to require, the support and partnership from our dedicated provider agencies, City Council, numerous City agencies, and private organizations to lay the foundation for a strong, sustainable early care and education system. In the midst of the implementation of *EarlyLearnNYC*, we worked through Hurricane Sandy –which hit the very same month we began the roll-out – and under economic uncertainties such as the federal sequestration. However, through these challenging times, we have worked to support our providers. In the aftermath of the Hurricane, ACS secured \$2.4 million from private funders to rebuild our damaged centers and we've also secured over \$580,000 from the Administration for Children and Families to offer mental health and trauma related supports to all *EarlyLearn*

agencies, including staff and parents, regardless of whether they were directly or indirectly affected by Hurricane Sandy.

We are proud that we have laid the foundation for a stronger, higher quality early care and education system and we are greatly encouraged that President Obama's federal vision for early care and education looks much like *EarlyLearn NYC*: a model that braids city, state, federal and private funds to better serve our youngest residents and is driven by the belief that quality early education has enormous positive effects and prevents achievement gaps for youth from low-income communities.

We know that there are more challenges ahead. The fiscal climate continues to present obstacles as we aim to do more for our children. The Agency's Head Start grant was reduced by a third and funding from the State has decreased in the last few years while demand for the mandated services we provide continues to grow. Though we've made significant strides to increase communication with our providers, we know there is always room to do better. We also need to update and increase our infrastructure and better support our own staff. Finally, we know our providers also need more support. There is more work ahead. But, I am confident that together, we will continue to rise to the occasion because our children deserve high quality care and education.

I want to thank the Council for working with us during the transition, especially Chair Palma, and for providing leadership to make sure an additional 4,500 children in the City continue to receive child care. I also want to extend our sincere gratitude to our provider agencies, parents, and our early care and

education staff for their resiliency, hard work and determination during this momentous year. I am happy to answer your questions.