



The New York City Administration for Children's Services

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Testimony to the New York City Council, Committee on General Welfare

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“Oversight: *EarlyLearn NYC*”

Good morning Chair Levin and members of the General Welfare Committee. My name is Lorelei Atalie Vargas and I am the Deputy Commissioner for Early Care and Education at the Administration for Children's Services. With me today is Associate Commissioner Maria Benejan. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our vision for subsidized early care and education in New York City and to update the Council on *EarlyLearn NYC*.

I joined ACS in November 2014 and bring to this position a career of providing access and the highest quality services to children and families. I am excited to be part of the extraordinary efforts that the administration is undertaking to improve and sustain quality care and education for New York City's youngest children. Quality early education has an enormous impact on the development of cognitive, social, and emotional skills for all children. This is especially important for children coming from highly stressed environments, where strong skills and supports can help them mitigate the terrible impact of toxic stress. As this Council is aware, especially in a year that has included an unprecedented pre-kindergarten expansion, children who have the opportunity to participate in quality early childhood education are less likely to be held back in school, and are more likely to graduate from high school, which can ultimately improve their socioeconomic mobility, and yield an intergenerational progression of mobility.

The ACS Division of Early Care and Education administers one of the largest publicly-funded childcare systems in the country, serving approximately 100,000 infants, toddlers, preschool, and school-aged children. ACS provides services that enhance child development and assist low-income working families, eligible public assistance recipients, and families that are receiving child welfare services. ACS also provides access to child care by contracting with providers, as well as through vouchers issued to eligible parents, which may be used to purchase care in a variety of settings.

Overview of *EarlyLearn NYC*

In the fall of 2012, ACS launched *EarlyLearn NYC*, an innovative early childhood education model designed to raise educational standards, increase family supports and strengthen professional development for teachers. The model prepares children for success in elementary school and beyond. *EarlyLearn* has the capacity to serve approximately 35,000 children between the ages of six-weeks and four years of age in center-based and home-based settings.

Several features set *EarlyLearn* apart from what came before: in order to maximize the impact of all child care funding, the system bundles numerous distinct funding streams, including federal Head Start dollars, State Child Care Block Grant and UPK funds, as well as City Tax Levy and privately raised monies into a single early care and education system which standardizes care. All *EarlyLearn* programs—center-based and family child care—are premised upon developmentally appropriate, research-based curricula. Programs support teachers to engage in meaningful interactions in settings where children can grow, learn and thrive.

EarlyLearn embraces a holistic approach – all enrolled children receive health, mental health and developmental screenings to address underlying needs that may affect their ability to learn. *EarlyLearn* provides vital supports for working families, without which many could not be part of the workforce - programs offer full-day care: eight to ten hours of service per day, which includes nutritious meals and physical exercise. All *EarlyLearn* programs include a family engagement component in their curriculum that embraces their cultural and linguistic diversity and acknowledges the family's critical role in the care and education of their child. To continue strengthening the early childhood workforce, *EarlyLearn* has expanded professional development opportunities for the teachers in our programs. We require (and fund) twelve days of professional development for all center-based program staff and six days for those in family

child care settings. We also provide ongoing support to providers on a range of issues related to early childcare, physical and mental health, program design and management, as well as family and community engagement.

Pre-kindergarten and *EarlyLearn NYC*

Universal pre-kindergarten is folded into the funding and the service of *EarlyLearn*. ACS is a proud partner in the City's historic expansion of quality, full-day, free Universal Pre-kindergarten for four-year-olds in New York City. We collaborated with the Department of Education to bring pre-k services and standards to 53,500 New Yorkers born in 2010. Through *EarlyLearn*, ACS provides over 11,000 of those seats. The city-wide UPK expansion also allowed ACS to increase access to professional development for teachers and increase investments to help ensure recruitment and retention of high-quality UPK lead teachers with early childhood certification.

Current *EarlyLearn* Request for Proposals (RFP)

The overarching goal of *EarlyLearn* is to lay the strongest foundation possible for the future of New York City's children. Since its implementation in October 2012, our staff and providers have been working tirelessly to ensure the success of this system. Currently, 132 contractors are providing services to over 30,000 children in 351 centers and in 1,485 Family Child Care providers' homes across the five boroughs. Enrollment is at 87% and ACS continues to work with programs and families to make sure that families are aware of the nearest *EarlyLearn* center in their neighborhood.

As many of you know, ACS is also in the midst of a Request for Proposals (RFP) that will award an additional \$56 million annually in *EarlyLearn NYC* services. At the end of 2013, the prior administration baselined funding that the Council had used to support a number of child care providers that were not awarded seats in the initial *EarlyLearn* RFP issued in May 2011. The Council awards for fiscal year 2014 were continued by ACS via a Negotiated Acquisition Extension. At this juncture, City procurement rules require us to issue a competitive solicitation as an RFP to award these funds. We expect the RFP, for which proposals are due this Friday, to result in approximately 4,800 additional children accessing *EarlyLearn NYC* in 39 distinct zip codes. The point scale for this RFP differs from the initial *EarlyLearn* RFP issued in May 2011, in that more points are awarded for experience, emphasizing experience working in the particular community, and prior and anticipated engagement in the communities proposed to be served.

Moving Early Care & Education Forward: The City-wide Task Force

Over the past two and half years, New York City has seen significant early education achievements: in 2012, the entire contracted subsidized system was transformed through *EarlyLearn*; in 2014, 53,500 pre-kindergarten seats were offered and in 2015, an additional 4,800 *EarlyLearn* seats will be procured. Our early education system continues to improve but, it must be recognized that the system is still in the midst of a necessary transformation. Particularly with regard to the subsidized system that serves our youngest New Yorkers, much work remains. We are constantly striving to ensure that our vision for the entire early education system is realized. That vision – shared throughout this administration – is to create a comprehensive, quality continuum for all children in New York City, from early childhood through pre-k to school age students.

While *EarlyLearn* is designed to raise educational standards, we recognize that execution has varied. Since its implementation, advocates, providers, and parents have raised concerns about both contracted care and vouchers. In response, this administration has recognized the need for a comprehensive approach to address these concerns and to continue improving services for children receiving subsidized care. In October 2014, Health and Human Services Deputy Mayor Lilliam Barrios-Paoli and ACS Commissioner Gladys Carrión convened a task force of key stakeholders to develop recommendations meant to enhance the City's Early Care and Education delivery system as a whole. Comprised of 44 key stakeholders, Task Force members represent a diverse group of the early care and education community, including all levels of government agencies, advocates, providers and child care consumers. The members are working in four separate work groups to address key components related to strengthening the quality and efficiency of the ECE system. Each workgroup has considered a wide range of opinions, data, experience, theory and best practices to develop recommendations for continuing to improve quality of care, increasing enrollment in contracted care and determining how best to serve both public assistance and low-income families. This Task Force is also exploring whether regulatory changes might reduce the significant amount of resources that providers must use in order to navigate complex regulatory procedures and policies in carrying out their work.

After working diligently for months, the Task Force will meet for the last time at the end of January 2015 to finalize recommendations that will be presented to the Mayor for consideration. ACS actively participated in each of the workgroups as well as all of the Task Force meetings and I feel confident that the recommendations will serve the best interests of children and families. I look forward to discussing the finalized recommendations when they are released.

Moving Early Care & Education Forward: ACS

As the Task Force has been developing recommendations, the ACS Division of Early Care and Education (ECE) continues to assess additional ways to improve the system. We are deeply invested in moving toward a coordinated and aligned early care and education system that is good for children, easy for families to navigate, and efficient and streamlined for providers of services and for the numerous City agencies involved in early learning. In the coming year, ECE is working on several major projects to serve this goal.

The requirements associated with *EarlyLearn* created an essential shift for community-based child care providers to alter their practice from solely providing services to providing services **within the context of** operating a small business. I am very pleased to announce that ACS is exploring a partnership with the New York City Department of Small Business Services (SBS) to address ways in which SBS may provide business support to our *EarlyLearn* agencies, specifically around budgeting, bookkeeping, marketing skills and other essential business practices that may be new to many of our providers.

Another way we hope to be able to assist both providers and families is by exploring a mapping system – using web-based geographic information system (GIS) technology – that could provide families seeking care with information about nearby, real time vacancies. In tandem with the mapping system, ACS is working with the Department of Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT), and our partners to revamp our entire website to better serve families. Our focus for the Early Care & Education webpage is to clearly articulate for our parents, providers and partners the various options available for early care and education, and to, again, introduce enhanced transparency to the process.

And finally, given these massive system transformations that have taken place in the past two and half years, we need to reexamine where our services are located. As the demographics in the City shift, so too must the services. ACS is planning to conduct an updated Community Needs Analysis to ensure that our seats are located where the need for subsidized care is greatest. We remain cognizant that pockets of poverty persist in otherwise affluent neighborhoods and that the cost of real estate continues to skyrocket. Our aim is to create an approach that is as nuanced as possible in our analysis of the needs for subsidized care. Thankfully, some of this work is already underway and we are eager to partner with advocates and research organizations throughout the City who are thoughtfully pursuing how to ensure that seats remain in, or are relocated to, the neighborhoods where the need is greatest.

While all three of these projects are just getting started, I am hopeful that they will each address some of the concerns that have been raised about the challenges that our providers and families face. I thank you again for the opportunity to update the Council about our early care and education services, and I look forward to partnering with all of you as we continue to refine our systems and approach. And I welcome your questions.