



SENATE COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN & FAMILIES  
ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN & FAMILIES  
ASSEMBLY LEGISLATIVE TASKFORCE ON WOMEN'S ISSUES

**May 23, 2017**

**Access to Quality Child Care**

**Testimony of the  
New York City Administration for Children's Services**

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Good morning, Chair Avella, Chair Jaffee, and Chair Mayer and members of the Senate Committee on Children and Families, the Assembly Standing Committee on Children and Families, and the Assembly Legislative Taskforce on Women's Issues. My name is Lorelei Atalie Vargas and I am the Deputy Commissioner for Early Care and Education at the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS). On behalf of Commissioner David A. Hansell, thank you for the opportunity to discuss access to quality child care in New York. ACS appreciates the legislature's attention to this issue and we are pleased to participate in this important dialogue.

We know that the early years of a child's life are the most critical years for brain development, and while genetics provide the basic blueprint, experience determines whether a child will have a strong or weak foundation for all future behavior, learning and health. Brain development helps to build the foundation for valuable skills including motor, behavioral, language, memory, visual and emotional. Quality early care and education is the front door to building a better brain. Future social and academic success is not easily achieved without first developing a solid foundation for healthy social, emotional and cognitive development.

In order to achieve this we must make a critical ideological shift in our thinking. We must consider child care as a necessity for the healthy development of our children that will set them up for academic success and provide them what they need to effectively contribute to our society, improve their socioeconomic mobility, and ultimately yield an intergenerational progression of growth.

## **Access to Quality Child Care through ACS**

The ACS Division of Early Care and Education (ECE) administers one of the largest publicly-funded childcare systems in the country, with the capacity to serve almost 110,000 infants, toddlers, preschool, and school-aged children. ACS provides access to child care in two primary ways: we run a contracted system, called *EarlyLearn NYC*, which serves children between the ages of 6 weeks and five years and includes both state-funded Child Care programs and federally funded Head Start programs. We also fund vouchers that parents may use to purchase care in a variety of settings for children between the ages of six weeks and 13 years. Further, ACS serves children with special needs through age 18 and up to age 19 if they are a full time student in an educational or vocational activity. Our services enhance child development and assist eligible public assistance recipients, low-income working families and families that are receiving child welfare services.

Families receiving public assistance and children receiving ACS child welfare services who have child care identified as a supportive service are automatically eligible for subsidized child care. However, eligibility requirements connected with the funding stream can often create barriers to access, and this is particularly true for our largest source of funding, the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG).

## **Barriers to Child Care**

### Child Care and Development Block Grant

New York City administers approximately two thirds of the state's child care subsidy system. In State Fiscal Year 2016, ACS' CCDBG allocation was approximately \$500 million, which funded subsidized child care at least partially for 30,751 children in families with income at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level, and for 44,167 children whose

families are receiving cash assistance. Local social service districts are mandated to provide child care to families in receipt of cash assistance, and we do so via both vouchers and our contracted early care and education system.

ACS is pleased that the federal government reauthorized the Child Care and Development Block Grant. Given that the changes required by the reauthorization reflect important modifications to health and safety, as well as eligibility, it is imperative that funding is provided for these new requirements so that they do not come at the cost of reducing access to the subsidy. Additionally, while costs and State market rates have increased for CCDBG funded vouchers, the City's CCDBG allocation has remained relatively flat until this State Fiscal Year when the State reduced the City's allocation by \$3.8 million, exacerbating an unmet need for childcare in New York City.

#### Citizenship and Immigration Status

While New York City residents may access a variety of services through ACS regardless of their citizenship or immigration status, such information is required in order to access some child care services through ACS.

Children in families that receive cash assistance must follow TANF eligibility rules, which require the parent to be a citizen. Families applying for non-mandated CDBG funded child care through vouchers and *EarlyLearn NYC* (except *EarlyLearn NYC* Head Start programs) must certify that all children to receive child care are citizens, nationals or persons with satisfactory immigration status, but are not required to note citizenship or immigration status of anyone else in the family. However, the application does require families to attest to understanding that information about the children noted in the application may be submitted to INS.

ACS works in earnest to make sure that families understand citizenship and immigration status requirements to access our child care programs. To help ensure clarity, the ACS Division of Early Care and Education is working with all of our child care providers so that they can clearly discuss these requirements with families. ECE is also developing signs that clearly articulate immigration status requirements, which will be posted conspicuously in our programs and resource areas where families apply for child care.

While New York City has gone to great lengths to ensure that child care services are accessible to all families in the City, we firmly believe that immigration status should not be a barrier to accessing quality child care and early education programs, and we ask the State to advocate for making this a reality for all children across New York.

## **New York City's Commitment to Quality Child Care**

### **Trauma Smart Implementation**

The City of New York also invests private and city tax levy dollars in ensuring high quality child care services. In 2016 ACS, as part of NYC First Lady Chirlane McCray's Thrive NYC Roadmap, committed to investing \$14 million over four years in *EarlyLearn NYC* child care centers and surrounding communities. ACS ECE has begun to implement Trauma Smart®, an innovative evidence-based practice model designed to address trauma and adversity for children ages 6 weeks to 5 years. All *EarlyLearn NYC* programs and home-based providers will be trained in the social and emotional learning foundations of trauma-informed care while ACS increases its social worker capacity to provide ongoing coaching and support for *EarlyLearn NYC* child care providers.

Our goal is to create a trauma-informed early care and education system across New York City. Trauma Smart® is designed to address the wide range of experiences impacting

our children and families. A kickoff event was held in December 2016, where hundreds of families participated in activities related to Trauma Smart® training and accessed resources from a variety of city agencies. The first cohort of EarlyLearn program staff began training in February and will finish that training in August. The second cohort will begin in September 2017.

### Work with Homeless Families

ACS works with the New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS) to improve access to subsidized early care and education for families in shelter. As part of our ongoing efforts, ACS partnered with DHS and the New York City Department of Education (DOE) to launch an initiative to facilitate the enrollment of children in DHS shelters in *EarlyLearn NYC* programs. ACS reviewed *EarlyLearn NYC* vacancies in proximity to nearby shelters and held enrollment drives in conjunction with DHS in an effort to better reach families in shelter who were not enrolled in early education programs. In addition, ECE routinely conducts presentations and trainings on the importance of high-quality early education and how to access these services for families, and we work with frontline ACS, DHS and provider staff on how best to engage parents around the benefits of quality early childhood education and to assist them in applying to programs that best serve their needs.

As you may know, as of February 27, 2017 non-mandated families experiencing homelessness are now exempt from paying a family share (fee) based upon the family's income when they attend a child care program-- New York City is now responsible for the cost share. Families experiencing homelessness who were paying a fee prior to February 27<sup>th</sup> and the child care programs in which they are enrolled have been notified of the change in

policy. Additionally, homeless families with children five years old and under receive referrals to *EarlyLearn NYC* programs.

### Expansion of Eligibility

Non-mandated child care vouchers are for families with an income that is up to 200% of the Federal Poverty Level and have a reason for care, meaning they work a minimum of 20 hours per week, OR are engaged in an approved educational or vocational activity, OR need child care to attend domestic violence services. This year, the ACS Division of Early Care and Education was pleased to have opened additional reasons for subsidized child care, as approved by OCFS in 2016, allowing more children in low-income and high-need families to receive quality care via our *EarlyLearn NYC* contracted child care programs. As of January 1, 2017, ACS added the following reasons for care for families earning less than 200% of the Federal Poverty Level:

- Homelessness (McKinney-Vento definition)
- Attending a 4 year college and working 17.5 hours a week
- Looking for work (for up to 6 months)

These additions use a two-generation lens to consider the value of access to high quality child care for children and families, and help shift the ideology from child care as a need to a necessity.

### Federal Head Start Audits

Head Start is a federally funded program that provides eligible three and four year olds center-based early education programming and requires ACS to comply with 1,300 Head Start Performance Standards. Families with an income of up to 100% of the Federal Poverty

Level (including families receiving cash assistance), children in foster care, and children that are homeless qualify for subsidized care under Head Start.

After a scheduled audit on Eligibility, Recruitment, Selection, Attendance and Enrollment (ERSEA) as well as an audit on Fiscal Integrity in May 2016, ACS received a report from the federal Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start (OHS) indicating there were no areas of non-compliance found and no corrective action is required. These are the first two successful audits by OHS in several years. Following these successful audits, ACS also had an unannounced federal audit in late June 2016 to follow up on the December 2014 Environmental Health and Safety Review; once again, OHS found no outstanding issues and praised the new monitoring system that ACS put in place. We are proud to be running a high-quality early education system that was able to achieve three clear audits – this is quite the accomplishment for a Head Start super grantee.

### 3-K for All

Finally, ACS is excited to play a pivotal role in strengthening the continuum of high quality early childhood education for all children from birth to five-years-old through Mayor Bill de Blasio's expansion of pre-kindergarten, with 3-K for All. With the announcement of 3-K for All, the City has recognized that our children and families will benefit greatly from a unified early care and education system that is linked to the larger K-12 system. Given the overlap of DOE's early care and education programs with ACS' *EarlyLearn NYC* programs, *EarlyLearn NYC* contracts will be integrated into DOE's Division of Early Childhood Education. This integration will create consistent high quality standards across the publicly-funded early childhood continuum that better transitions to elementary school. ACS has already begun working with DOE to begin the integration, with a goal of completion by July



2018. 3-K for All will ultimately be the largest program of its kind in the nation, and will begin in the 2017-2018 school year with the creation of three-year-old preschool seats in School District 7 in the South Bronx and School District 23 in Brownsville, Brooklyn.

As *EarlyLearn NYC* transfers to DOE next summer, ACS will continue to administer New York City's child care voucher system. We will continue our efforts to bolster the quality of care in this system in collaboration with the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA), the Department of Health & Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) and DOE.

### **Closing**

In closing, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to discuss access to quality child care. ACS and the City's Administration are deeply committed to providing high quality care and education to meet the needs of families in New York City. ACS is grateful for the support of the State legislature in this mission and we look forward to further cultivating our partnership with you and all of our partners in Albany to carry out this important work.