New York Association for the Education of Young Children

Testimony for the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Human Services
February 9, 2021
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Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. Our mission at the New York Association for the Education of Young Children (NYAEYC) is to promote excellence in early care and education for New York State children and families through education, advocacy, and the support of the profession. As a statewide organization with over 3,000 members in the field of early education and care, we represent a workforce that has been the backbone of our state through the course of the pandemic.

Early childhood educators provide stability, nutrition, education, nurturing, and support for young children and their families in times when they are needed most. By staying open for essential workers, they ensured that our health care, sanitation, food service, and other essential businesses were able to operate. They did so at great risk of their own health, finances, and stability. **We believe now is the time for New York State to commit to building the system that our young children, families, and early childhood educators deserve.** We join with the Empire State Campaign for Child Care and Winning Beginning NY to call on the State Legislature "to provide New York's child care sector the funds necessary to stabilize and begin to rebuild… and to lay the foundations for a universal system that serves all New York families that need care, one animated by the emerging recognition that child care is a public good, and is an integral part of a birth to 12 education system."

At the onset of the pandemic, our organization sought to understand the difficulties facing our field by collecting data through two surveys in April and May. This culminated in our report "Save Child Care. Essential Work. Essential Stories," which combined data and anecdotal experiences to share the stories of passion, fear, and tremendous hardship facing child care providers across the state. In this report, we highlighted the following major, ongoing problems facing our state's child care programs:

1. Our enrollment-based system is financially unsustainable.
2. The PPP was not an adequate relief mechanism for our sector and often denied in-home and minority-owned child care programs.
3. Child care program directors are unable to pay their staff a fair wage for their challenging and currently high-risk work.
4. Immunocompromised and at-risk members of the child care workforce need protection to stay home without losing their livelihoods.
5. Child care programs operating face-to-face must receive funds for ventilation improvements and supplies of high quality PPE and disinfectants.

We conducted a rigorous Congressional advocacy campaign in order to support national coalitions in their request for $50 billion in stimulus funds for child care. Subsequently, the Child Care is Essential Act received bipartisan support from the New York State House delegation, with three New York Republican Representatives crossing the aisle to vote in favor of it. As we continue to work hard to advocate for much-needed funding to come from the federal government, we respectfully request that New York State follows through by distributing those funds to child care programs equitably, quickly, and with as few administrative barriers as possible. We support the Empire State Campaign for Child Care, Raising New York, and Winning Beginning NY recommendations for 2021 stimulus funds.

Though there are unspent 2020 CARES Act and CCDBG dollars, it is of the utmost importance to emphasize that a lack of follow-through due to bureaucratic bottlenecks should not signal a lack of need. Our financially starved system has not fully reimbursed educators with promised CARES Act funds, putting child care program directors and owners in positions that few other professions would ever have to face. In a survey released in December of 2020, NAEYC found that 60% of New York's child care program directors and owners reported "putting supplies or other items on their personal credit card or dipping into their personal savings accounts, including 82% of family child care homes" (NAEYC). Programs are struggling with low levels of enrollment and expenses higher than ever. In fact, 62% of New York State respondents in the same survey "said they are currently losing money by remaining open, even as they are desperately trying to stay open for the children and families they serve" – a number 6% higher than the national average (NAEYC).

Every week, we hear from center directors and family child care owners who still have not been reimbursed with their promised CARES Act funding. It has been eight months since an open letter was sent to the Governor and six months since members of the State Legislature held press conferences across the state asking for this funding to be released. It would be deeply detrimental to our state's recovery and demoralizing for early childhood educators for the new stimulus funds to be withheld in the same manner. As stated above, we have evidence that distributing funds as a reimbursement means these owners and directors have to borrow personal loans or use personal credit because they do not have access to business accounts. **While educators may be willing to sacrifice their own financial stability to keep serving their communities, it is unjust of our state to rely on this sacrifice as a means of propping up its child care system.**

Prior to the pandemic, early childhood educators earned so little that 65% of New York's child care educators relied on supports such as SNAP, Medicaid, TANF, and the Earned Income Tax Credit to make ends meet for their families (CSCCE). Furthermore, the roles in our field that are more frequently filled by Black and brown women – especially in infant and toddler care – are those with the lowest pay and fewest benefits. Programs are unable to provide the wages and benefits they know their educators deserve. As minimum wage rises without state subsidy or parent payments keeping up, wage compression occurs and increases turnover – less stressful jobs in retail and fast food offer more opportunities for advancement and higher pay. Turnover in early childhood education is harmful for children – who depend on reliable bonds with their caregivers – and expensive for programs – with the associated costs of recruitment and background checks. Recently, anecdotal evidence has emerged emphasizing that already high rates of turnover have skyrocketed during the pandemic (Tate).

Programs can only continue to operate for so long out of the goodwill of their hearts, a sense of duty to the families they serve, and the extremely limited funds in their pockets. According to NAEYC's December survey, 41% of New York's child care directors and owners "are confronting so much uncertainty that they are unable to say how much longer they will be able to stay open." A further 29% "say they will have to close within three months, including 40% of family child care homes, if enrollment stays where it is and they don't receive additional public support." The percentage of New York's respondents saying they will close without support is higher than the national average. While the Governor's Executive Budget takes small steps in the right direction, it is crucial to note that tax credits and small investments cannot solve the supply side of our state's child care crisis. Families – especially mothers – will need child care programs to be open and stable as we begin to heal from this crisis. Waiting too long to begin rebuilding will only prolong our state's economic hardship.

An ambitious vision to put New York on a path to universal child care with fair wages for the critically important work of early childhood educators is expected to be outlined in the Governor's Child Care Availability Task Force recommendations. These recommendations were, per statute, intended to be released in December 2020. As we await their release, we hope that the Governor and State Legislature take seriously the responsibility of an economic recovery that supports families by investing in the report's recommendations. Now is the time for our state to lead, with racial and gender equity at the heart of our recovery.

While we respect the very difficult position of weighing competing priorities in times of such need, we hope that the State Legislature understands the crucial role child care plays in all other facets of our economic and social prosperity. We join with ESCCC and Winning Beginning NY to ask that the budget:

1. **Raise new state revenue if necessary, to make these necessary investments to stabilize the child care industry, and expand access to more families.** *These are unprecedented times; it is just and appropriate to ask those New Yorkers who have prospered since the pandemic struck to contribute more to the state's recovery;*

2. **Make no cuts to 2020 funding for child care in 2021;**

3. **Provide counties with $370 million to make the child care subsidy system more equitable by eliminating unfair eligibility variations across counties and communities, and prioritizing families with the greatest need by:**

- Making child care subsidies available consistently statewide to all income-eligible families who are unemployed and seeking work, retraining, or pursuing higher education; families involved in domestic violence; families receiving preventive child welfare services; foster families; families experiencing homelessness; and children with special needs;
- Incrementally expand subsidy eligibility to at least 85% of the state median income (beginning with regions with a high cost of living and/or those hit hard by the impacts of the pandemic);
- Reduce parent co-pays to no more than 10% of income over the federal poverty level in counties that are currently above that level as a step toward ensuring that one day, no New York family pays more than 7% of income for child care; and
- Pay subsidy to providers for at least 12 absences/quarter per child, plus federal holidays, building toward a system in which subsidy is not paid based on a child's daily attendance, but based on enrollment;

4. **Commit to eliminating expulsions and suspensions in child care and pre-K**, which disproportionately impact children of color, by setting a statewide prohibition on suspensions and expulsions (in most cases) while investing at **least $15 million** to infant-toddler resource centers to provide child care and pre-K programs the supports they need to meet the developmental, mental health, social-emotional needs of all the children in their care; and
5. **Invest $100 million to create a fund to increase workforce compensation to a fair wage and improve child care quality**. Priority should be given to programs that serve low-income families and care for infants and toddlers.

Sources Cited

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