

**TESTIMONY TO
JOINT LEGISLATIVE BUDGET HEARING
ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION
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Submitted by: Steven Sanders, Executive Director
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Good afternoon, I am Steven Sanders, Executive Director of Agencies for Children's Therapy Services. My association provides the majority of Early Intervention services in the State as well as Pre-School Special Education programs.

Some budget matters are complicated. The case for an Early Intervention rate increase, an oversight by the Executive, is not complicated... it is obvious and it is right.

For nearly two decades the program has received virtually no increase, no trend, no COLA. The Deficit Reduction Program cuts from twelve years ago of over 15% were never restored. And this despite the fact that during that period of time new non-reimbursable responsibilities were placed on Early Intervention providers who serve 70,000 at risk toddlers and their families.

The result of this neglect is that therapists are leaving the program in alarming numbers. They are migrating to other health or education related service venues where they can be compensated adequately for their professional skills, which in many cases requires advanced academic degrees.

No one should be surprised that in the past two years the Early Intervention Program has lost nearly 2,200 highly qualified therapists. That means fewer children are being served in the manner and frequency they need and are legally entitled to.

Last year the Legislature passed a law sponsored by Assembly Member Amy Paulin and Senator Elijah Reichlin-Melnick with the critically important backing of the Chairs of the Assembly and Senate Health Committees, Dick Gottfried and Gustavo Rivera that saves the State and Counties a combined \$28M per year in Early Intervention costs by requiring commercial insurance to finally pay their fair share. The Executive calculates the State share of those savings to be \$15.4M.

Those savings need to be reinvested into the program to help underwrite an 11% increase for these agency providers and therapists. That is the identical increase that the Governor has promised to providers of pre-school special education programs.

Those pre-school programs and children have much the same service needs as children in the Early Intervention Program. In fact, most of these children have aged out of Early Intervention and are now just a few months older. There is no rational reason or difference to exclude Early Intervention programs from the pre-school special education rate increase. The two programs are parallel in many respects. Pre- school special education professionals deserve that rate increase. But so do Early Intervention professionals...even more so.

Increased funding is not always the answer to every government problem, and even when it is, the state is not always in a position to respond accordingly. But when a program is in an existential crisis and hemorrhaging critically needed personnel because of insufficient pay from decades of frozen or lowered rates and the state has the necessary resources, there is no

escaping the fact that adequate funding IS the answer. An 11% increase makes perfect sense by aligning the rate adjustment to pre-school special education programs. Better still that fair increase for Early Intervention can largely be paid for from the savings legislated in 2021.

The Assembly and Senate have an opportunity to put the Early Intervention Program on a more stable financial footing for the future and stop the exodus of needed therapists. And much of this can be accomplished by simply re-investing the Early Intervention savings you enacted last year.

You can correct the omission from the Executive budget recommendations.

The Legislature has always been the greatest ally for the Early Intervention Program and the 70,000 at risk toddlers and their families. We need your support now more than ever.

Thank You So Much