



**Primary Mental Health Project is ready to meet *greater demands for children's social-emotional supports***

Dear Members of the 2023 Joint Legislative Budget Committee:

Thank you for the continued support of Children's Institute (a NYS nonprofit formerly known as 'Primary Mental Health Project') during 2022-23.

**The mission of Children's Institute is, "joining together to raise every child's complete wellbeing."** Through cost-effective and research-proven preventive and health-promoting strategies centered on social and emotional development, we raise every child's complete wellbeing - individually, collectively, and responsively to culture and equity. We provide program implementation, consultation, training, services, research, and evaluation (including screening tool development) *to improve children's social and emotional adjustment and school success.*

"Primary Mental Health Project" (PMHP) is again a proposed *Aid to Localities* item in NYSED's Executive Budget for next year, 2023-24. So that we may continue to protect the wellbeing of children across NYS's schools as we have for over 60 years, we are very grateful that Governor Hochul again proposes that New York State's support continues in 2023-24. We also greatly appreciate your invitation to provide testimony in response to Governor Hochul's 2023-24 Executive Budget.

As you prepare your budget requests for 2023-24, we respectfully request the following information be considered:

PMHP helps schools grow their multi-tiered systems of support for socioemotional and related needs across the full spectrum of children's development, pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. For instance, our Get Ready to GROW comprehensive screening and response efforts, also funded in part by the PMHP funding, shows clearly that waiting until kindergarten to screen and intervene is currently too late for ~50% of preschool aged children we work with. PMHP responds also to the increase in local schools' needs for culturally responsive practice improvements to achieve greater equity in social and emotional learning.

While several Children's Institute initiatives are supported in NYS by the current NYSED funding, the following bullets highlight our flagship Primary Project program activities and outcomes of the 2021-22 school year.

- Primary Project (PMHP) currently provides *preventive* mental health services to K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade children who are starting to show signs of school adjustment issues. In 2021-22, starting with the screening of 5,007 students, **545 of children went on to participate in Primary Project's intervention services, and made significant social and emotional gains in areas related to school adjustment and learning this past school year.** Through Primary Project's provision of 5,492 shared play contacts with our trained paraprofessionals in NYS – children's anxious withdrawal is replaced with comfortable assertiveness as children face challenging situations in school. However, there remains a systematic lack of tier-2 services for pre-K children across NYS; ***increasing PMHP's funding in 2023-24 will help serve NYS's youngest students' mental health-related needs preventatively at the start of their school career - when prevention can have the greatest impact!***
- Key quality improvement efforts prepared paraprofessionals and other school-based mental health professionals in play-centered prevention for schools. ***Primary Project continues to create new***

***opportunities for employment and skill-building of paraprofessionals – a segment of school staffing that is essential to sustaining a robust pipeline of education professionals.***

- Children’s Institute also continues to help many schools respond to pandemic re-openings and other stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic. Young children’s mental health needs - and the demand for mental health professionals in schools- have increased to a degree not seen before. This unmet need must be addressed with preventative supports like Primary Project that effectively resolves students’ emergent needs. Mental health professionals can then maintain their needed focus on high-needs children, and work to the “top” of their professional preparation as compensated. ***We help them do so by building cost-effective systems with Primary Project that do not let mild/moderate needs among children fall through the cracks or worsen - by engaging trained paraprofessionals to work alongside schools’ mental health professionals.***
- Primary Project schools continued to show resilience in program excellence despite looming worries: certifications grew (21 new schools in NYS in 2021-22), and several schools volunteered for effectiveness research to examine program impacts. While Primary Project originated in NYS, it also continues to grow in its national reach; over this past year, it started in 23 additional schools – in California, Washington, D.C., Florida, and the State of Connecticut, with a total of 5 new national certifications in 2021-22.

We are so thankful for your support that resulted in the NYS FY2022-23 Enacted Budget including \$894,000 for the Children’s Institute’s Primary Mental Health Project (PMHP) that funded grants to 28 NYS schools. While children’s social-emotional and mental health needs continue to rise in NYS, PMHP has been level funded for ~15 years, after being cut significantly from prior levels of funding. ***We cannot wait to meet the socio-emotional needs of NYS children, preventatively and proactively. By restoring Primary Mental Health Project’s funding, we can provide effective and cost-efficient preventative measures for more NYS children and reduce costly mental health service needs that are still rising. We seek \$1.25M in the FY 2023-24 NYS Budget to keep pace with pandemic-induced needs.***

Without this level of support, we will not be able to address the unprecedented need for Primary Project throughout NYS. Twenty-nine requests for our PMHP funding are pending to districts across the state so they may begin Primary Project in the coming school year. This upsurge in applicants was expected, as educators continue to seek needed services for children directly impacted by the COVID pandemic, recovery phases, and related risk factors experienced to a larger degree by families and communities. We can only respond to this great level of need in the upcoming coming year, however, if funding of \$1.25 million is approved in the enacted 2023-24 NYS budget. We are very thankful that our funding is maintained as a line item in the proposed 2023-2024 budget, but we will not be able to support all the new schools and students who are ready to receive Primary Project (as the Governor’s proposed level is again at a “cut” rate, that has unchanged in ~15 years).

**Funding Primary Project to a greater degree will ensure more children across the state receive crucial and timely preventative support for their social emotional well-being, school adjustment, and readiness for learning. Please consider an increase in the PMHP NYSED Aid to Localities line item, as \$1.2 billion of schools’ “aid funding” is considered by the state. We can also grow PMHP via an allocation of the \$30 million dollars currently requested for mental health care in schools within the Governor’s proposed budget. As new funds get directed to pre-K, we can also return to expanding Primary Project with pre-K students while examining its impact as families and schools seek to recover from the many mental-health related stressors now found at all ages and grade levels of schools.**

We can also ensure that funding for expansion of our services will immediately support children in receiving more: screening/referral, targeted play-based prevention, and social and emotional learning services that restore children’s well-being to learn and engage in classrooms. These services prevent and mitigate school

adjustment problems across NYS at key points across the developmental continuum – from the earliest learning classrooms through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Children’s Institute can quickly respond to the local need for preventative approaches in urban, suburban, and rural areas and facilitate crucial enhancements for social emotional development through teaching and curriculum including the implementation of culturally responsive socioemotional learning in schools across NYS. It is important that these supports systematically reach all students at the earliest possible time.

In summary, Primary Mental Health Project activities result in children’s socio-emotional needs being identified and addressed sooner with integrated school services throughout this period of life. Every year, we spend the total NYS Aid to Localities PMHP item to strengthen schools via:

- **Systematic screening** of children’s social and emotional adjustment in K-3 classrooms (*Primary Project*), as well as children’s comprehensive developmental/health needs in Pre-K-aged settings (*Get Ready to GROW*), with data-based decision-making that **optimizes school mental health professionals’ as well as teachers and parents’ time**;
- Cost-effective **play-based tier-2 intervention led by paraprofessionals in schools**, trained in an evidence-based approach that quickly resolves children’s display of moderate risk behaviors in K-3 classrooms (*Primary Project*);
- Improved **systemic approaches to social and emotional learning** in schools and with parents to universally promote children’s wellbeing across children’s developmental continuum (*Whole Child Connection*).

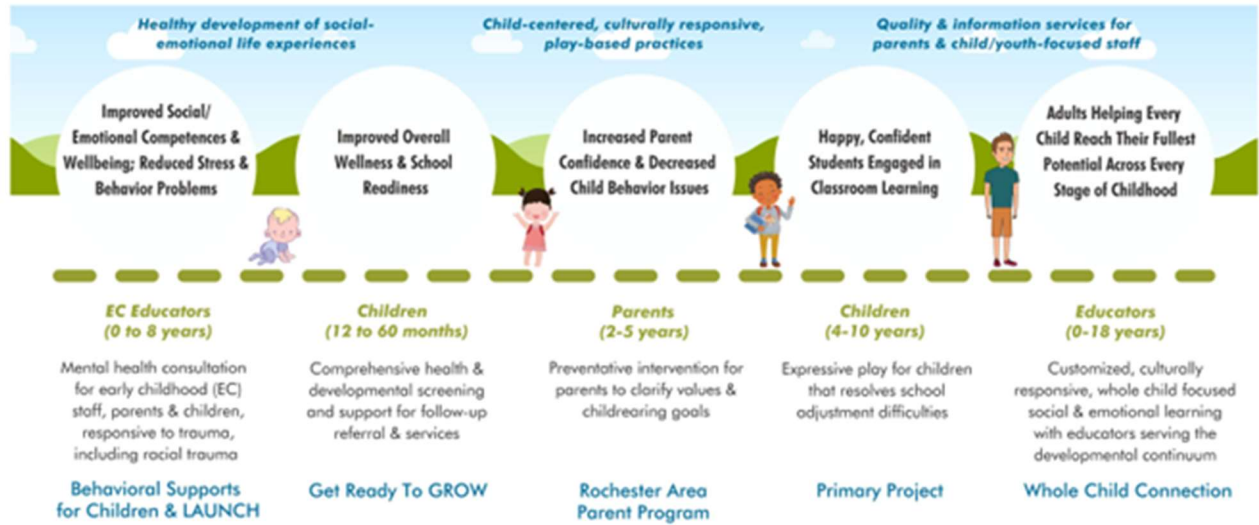
Thank you for your continued attention so that we may address young students’ well-being and ability to learn in classrooms. We value your continued support of Children’s Institute’s services for communities across New York State.

Sincerely,



Ann Marie White, Ed.D.  
Executive Director

# Because Kids Can't Wait



**Our Mission: Joining together to raise every child's complete wellbeing**

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