

Written Testimony Prepared for the Joint Legislative Public
Hearing on the 2026-27 Executive Budget Proposal

Elementary Education & Secondary Education

Legislative Office Building

Hearing Room B

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Submitted by:

Crestwood Country Day School

Pierce Country Day School

Ivy League School and Day School

Driftwood Day School

Merrick Woods School

Hidden Pond Day School at The Rinx

Big Chief Day School

North Shore Day School

Twin Oaks Day School

Background

While New York has stated a commitment to funding a truly universal Pre-K system, the current funding mechanisms, and underfunding of the program, are woefully inadequate in meeting this goal. Current funding for so-called “universal” Pre-K is a mix of state expense-based aid and competitive startup grant programs. Many school districts receive only \$5,400 per student per year which is not sufficient to cover basic costs for providers, especially given the current requirements for staffing (student/teacher ratios) and instruction under the program. Higher-needs school districts that receive more funding per student are also unable to cover basic costs under the current funding model.

The underfunding Pre-K slots prevent many school districts from running these programs themselves. Instead, many districts rely on community-based organizations (CBOs) to operate Pre-K programs in their districts. Unfortunately, CBOs are struggling to meet this need due to inadequate per-pupil funding.

We are private, community-based providers of Pre-Kindergarten programs in our respective communities and know how the current Pre-K funding model has failed to achieve universality, despite state spending of hundreds of millions of dollars a year to create a program that is supposedly accessible to all.

While we applaud the Governor for proposing to increase the minimum per pupil amount for UPK slots to at least \$10,000 per student in her SFY 2026-27 Executive Budget, this funding alone will not be sufficient to truly make this program universal.

On average, the operating cost for a single student in Pre-K for private entities on Long Island often exceeds \$17,000 annually. Meanwhile, the average per pupil spending across the state is \$25,000 to \$36,000 annually for K-12 education. While \$10,000 for Pre-K brings us closer to the mark, it doesn’t allow community-based providers like us to meet the expenses to run a high-quality program.

New York’s underfunding of Pre-K slots has had the unintended effect of harming community-based providers that have traditionally run these programs outside of the local and state funding systems. Current community-based providers are put in the untenable position of losing students to Pre-K programs run by school districts or having to accept these same students at well below their operating costs. This is creating a downward spiral that is worsening due to student loss coupled with unsustainable funding levels. Community-providers are closing their doors. School districts desperate for Pre-K space are unable to find community-based Pre-K partners. Without a state-level fix, community-based Pre-K education will eventually collapse.

Prioritize The Most Needy Families in UPK

Instead of policies that add more unfilled seats to the Pre-K program, the state should focus resources on higher-needs families and communities who cannot afford to pay out-of-pocket for private Pre-K. It makes no sense to award wealthy families free Pre-K slots through a lottery system, while families with limited financial resources go without placements. A funding system that prioritizes low-income families and children who are emergent language learners will ensure that those who would benefit most from free high-quality Pre-K are ensured a spot in these programs.

In addition to raising the per-pupil rate, the state should re-think how to better allocate Pre-K resources that will better serve the children who need them most and will ensure that the fragile Pre-K system will survive and thrive. Even with the \$10,000 per pupil amounts, there will still not be enough available slots for all those that are seeking Pre-K seats. If a school district does not have enough slots to meet the need of their community and is forced to continue conducting a “lottery” system, priority for Pre-K slots should be given to lower-income families and families with emergent language learners. Legislation sponsored by Assemblymember Michaelle Solages and Senator Monica Martinez provides a plan to achieve this goal (S6328/A6583).

Similarly, Senator Pat Fahy and Assemblymember Solages (S1491/A8395) also sponsor legislation requiring school districts to prioritize Pre-K seats to families with children eligible for free/reduced price lunch or are emergent multilingual language learners. Both bills are worthy of consideration for the final budget.

Align Pre-K and OCFS Pre-K Student Ratios and Amend Class Size Cap

Current Pre-K regulations require that the maximum class size for classrooms is 20 children. For classes up to 18 children, one teacher and one paraprofessional are required. For classes of 19 or 20 children, an additional paraprofessional is required for a total of 3 staff. For Pre-K students under OCFS supervision, the ratios require 1 teacher for the first 8 children, an additional teacher assistant for the next 8 children, and a third teacher assistant for the next 5 children, with a maximum class size of 21. Under both the Pre-K and OCFS overseen Pre-K programs, the current funding level makes it financially impossible to hire the required third teaching assistant as the per-pupil funding does not come close to covering even the salary of the additional third teaching assistant.

Aligning the regulations related to student-teacher ratios between Pre-K and OCFS will make for an easier transition for community providers. It will allow for more flexibility on maximum class size to help the existing level of funding go further without compromising the quality of services provided. For instance, aligning the current Pre-K 9-1 teacher-student ratio for the first 18 students (1 teacher and 1 teaching assistant) for OCFS providers would add seats to OCFS regulated programs. Similarly, increasing the

maximum class size for Pre-K and OCFS programs to 22 students (per regulations for non-public school Kindergarten programs) would allow providers in both programs to open more seats and make the hiring of a third teacher assistant for the classroom more feasible.

We thank you for your consideration of the proposals outlined in this testimony. Please contact Dan Leinung at dleinung@tressadvisors.com with any questions.