



Testimony before the New York State Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Human Services

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Feb. 5, 2026

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the governor's proposed FY 2026–27 executive budget and its historic investments in child care and early education. We strongly support the administration's bold plan to expand access to high-quality child care for children under five and to make pre-K truly universal across New York State by the 2028–29 school year.

Building a cohesive early childhood system: Aligning infrastructure for long-term success

The governor's proposal to establish a new Office of Child Care and Early Education represents a significant and welcome step toward greater coordination across New York's early childhood system. For too long, early care and education in New York has been shaped by overlapping funding streams, standards, and regulations that providers, educators, and families must navigate daily.

Recent progress demonstrates what is possible when systems are intentionally aligned, like the historic partnership between New York State and New York City around 2-Care.

As the state moves toward universal child care, cohesion must be a central goal. A truly effective early childhood system requires shared infrastructure, common standards, and aligned data and workforce systems that support quality, accountability, and continuous improvement.

New York already has strong systemwide initiatives to support quality, accountability, and workforce development that could be integrated into the foundation of a unified statewide approach, including these initiatives at the New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute:

- **QUALITYstarsNY**, the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System for early childhood programs, which supports 2,000 programs across the state
- **The Aspire Registry**, which provides a comprehensive, statewide picture of the early childhood workforce, supporting career pathways and workforce planning; nearly 40,000 members of the state's early childhood workforce are already enrolled in the Aspire Registry



- Our **Career Development Centers**, which provide individualized academic planning and career guidance to early childhood professionals at no cost; since its founding, the Career Center has supported more than 15,000 clients
 - The Career Center's **Early Childhood Leadership Initiative** supports directors, administrators, family child care providers and other early childhood leaders with leadership-focused professional development and networking
 - The **Early Childhood Education Employment Network** offers hiring and employment support to early childhood programs

Educator compensation: The foundation of a sustainable child care system

Any expansion of child care and early learning depends on a stable, skilled, and adequately compensated workforce. Compensation is not a peripheral workforce issue; it is one of the foundational pillars on which quality, access, and sustainability rest.

Early childhood educators are responsible for children's learning, development, health, and safety during the most critical years of brain development. Yet across New York State, these professionals are among the lowest-paid workers, often earning wages that do not reflect their training, experience, or responsibility. Many educators qualify for public assistance themselves, and too many leave the field entirely due to financial instability — even when they are deeply committed to the work.

As New York expands access to child care and pre-K, failure to address compensation will undermine these investments. New classrooms and new seats cannot operate without qualified educators. Programs cannot retain staff, build continuity for children, or maintain quality when wages remain stagnant. *Expansion without compensation is not sustainable.*

Competitive compensation directly supports:

- **Workforce retention**, reducing turnover that disrupts children's learning and creates a knowledge and experience vacuum in early learning environments
- **Quality improvement**, as experienced educators remain in the profession and continue to build their practice
- **Equity**, particularly for a workforce that is predominantly women and disproportionately women of color
- **System stability**, ensuring that public investments result in reliable, high-quality services for families



When early childhood educators are compensated fairly, programs are stronger, children experience more consistent care, and families can rely on the system to meet their needs. With the governor's bold vision for universal child care, New York has an opportunity to develop a comprehensive workforce approach that includes a concrete career ladder, a transparent salary scale, and a salary supplement program to retain early care and learning professionals and recruit new providers — all of which are already in development through the state's Child Care Workforce Collaborative, which includes representatives from the governor's Child Care Availability Task Force, the Empire State Campaign for Child Care, the New York Association for the Education of Young Children, the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, the Early Care and Learning Council, and the Day Care Council of New York.

Leveraging these existing systems and stakeholders will give the state the smoothest path toward implementation of high-quality universal care.

If New York is serious about delivering universal child care and expanding pre-K statewide, the state must be equally serious about paying the workforce that makes those systems function. Investments in compensation are investments in quality, in children's outcomes, and in the long-term success of the state's early childhood system.

Building capacity for high-quality care: The importance of leadership

The success of New York's investment in child care will depend not only on access and compensation, but on strong, prepared leadership within early childhood programs. Directors, administrators, instructional leaders, and system-level leaders play a critical role in translating policy and funding into high-quality experiences for children and families.

Early childhood leaders are responsible for far more than program operations. They set the vision for quality, support and retain staff, manage complex funding streams, ensure regulatory compliance, engage families, and create inclusive, developmentally appropriate learning environments. In an era of rapid expansion and increased public investment, these responsibilities are only growing.

Yet leadership development in early childhood has historically been under-resourced. Many program leaders are promoted based on experience in the classroom without access to formal preparation in management, pedagogy, or systems leadership. Without intentional investment in leadership pathways, programs struggle to implement quality standards consistently, support educators effectively, or plan for long-term sustainability.



Fostering strong early childhood leadership is essential to:

- **Sustaining quality** as programs expand and serve more children
- **Supporting and retaining educators** through coaching, mentoring, and supportive workplace cultures
- **Implementing public investments effectively**, including pre-K expansion, subsidy changes, and quality initiatives
- **Strengthening family and community engagement**, particularly in diverse and high-need communities
- **Building system resilience**, enabling programs to adapt to policy changes and future growth

Leadership development also creates meaningful career pathways within early childhood education. Clear advancement opportunities help retain experienced educators, reduce burnout, and build institutional knowledge within programs. When educators can envision a future that includes leadership roles — instructional coach, site director, or system leader — the field becomes more stable and more professionalized.

This spring, the CUNY School of Professional Studies, in partnership with our Career Development Center, is launching its new master's degree program in early childhood policy and leadership. This program is one of the few graduate programs in the nation focused specifically on preparing early childhood professionals to become leaders in their field. The Career Development Center also supports early childhood leaders through its Leadership Initiative, a space for early childhood leaders to connect, reflect, and deepen their understanding of early childhood leadership in New York State.

Strong leadership is the bridge between policy and practice. By investing in early childhood leaders, New York can ensure that its historic investments in child care and Pre-K result not only in more seats, but in stronger programs, supported educators, and better outcomes for children and families.

Quality must grow alongside access: Ensuring strong outcomes as programs expand

It is essential that growth in access is matched by an equal commitment to quality. Expanding the number of seats without the systems and supports that ensure high-quality practice risks undermining the very outcomes these investments are meant to achieve for children, families, and communities.



Quality in early childhood education drives children's learning, development, and long-term success. High-quality programs support strong relationships, developmentally appropriate practice, inclusive environments, and continuous improvement. Research consistently shows that it is the quality of early learning experiences, not simply participation, that leads to positive outcomes for children.

New York has already built a strong foundation for quality through **QUALITYstarsNY**, the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System. In previous child care expansion efforts, **QUALITYstarsNY** has played a critical role in helping new programs establish high standards from the outset. Through coaching, technical assistance, and structured improvement planning, **QUALITYstarsNY** has helped programs move beyond minimum compliance and toward sustained quality — 80% of participating programs see their ratings increase or sustain a high-quality rating.

In 2025 alone, **QUALITYstarsNY** supported more than 2,100 programs across New York State, with an impact on 23,000 providers and educators and more than 80,000 children.

QUALITYstarsNY funded 746 tuition scholarships for participating educators to complete courses leading toward certification and associate, bachelor's, and master's degrees in early childhood education. With the support and guidance of their dedicated Quality Improvement Specialist, **QUALITYstarsNY** participating programs accomplished nearly 6,500 individual quality improvement goals in 2025. **QUALITYstarsNY** was able to make all this possible with an expenditure of about \$300 per child — a relatively small investment leading to big returns.

As the state expands child care and pre-K, **QUALITYstarsNY** should be considered essential infrastructure for implementation. It provides:

- **A consistent framework for quality statewide**, across diverse program types and settings
- **Hands-on support for new programs**, helping them get off to the strongest possible start
- **Ongoing coaching and technical assistance**, particularly valuable during periods of rapid growth and change
- **A culture of continuous quality improvement**, rather than a one-time assessment of compliance

Importantly, **QUALITYstarsNY** supports equity in expansion. New programs — particularly those serving high-need communities or operating with limited resources — benefit from structured quality supports that ensure children across the state have access to high-quality early learning experiences.

New York has an opportunity to build on what already works. By embedding quality into the next phase of child care and pre-K expansion, the state can ensure that growth is sustainable,



equitable, and grounded in what children need most: high-quality early learning environments supported by skilled educators and strong leadership.

Expanding the early learning workforce: The role of higher education

Higher education institutions, particularly our state's robust SUNY and CUNY systems, play an essential role in preparing the next generation of early childhood educators. We support the governor's plan to strengthen early childhood educator preparation through the expansion of workforce scholarships, like our own QUALITYstarsNY Academic Scholarship. We also urge the Legislature and Administration to encourage our higher education institutions to expand early childhood degree and certificate programs and support initiatives that foster smoother pathways to credential and degree attainment. Strengthening partnerships between higher education and the early childhood field helps ensure a steady pipeline of trained professionals who reflect the diversity of New York families and communities.

Conclusion

We strongly support the governor's vision to expand universal child care and Pre-K across New York State. These investments will help families thrive and strengthen our economy. To achieve the full promise of these historic initiatives, we urge the Legislature and Administration to prioritize compensation for educators, leadership development, sustained investment in QUALITYstarsNY, and strong higher education partnerships. With these pieces in place, New York can build a child care system that not only serves all families but sets a national standard for quality and equity.

Thank you.