



**TESTIMONY**  
Joint Legislative Hearing  
2013-2014 Executive Budget Proposal  
Elementary & Secondary Education

Presented by  
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The Center for Children's Initiatives (CCI), a nonprofit organization based in New York City, seeks to strengthen both access to and investment in high-quality early childhood education as a core educational service and critical strategy for preparing children for school success. CCI played a key role in advocating for and supporting the roll-out of the state's Universal Prekindergarten initiative and continues to serve as a respected source of information for policymakers, parents and professionals in the field, as well as the media. CCI is a member of the steering committee of Winning BeginningNY and currently helps lead the *Ready for Kindergarten, Ready for College* Campaign, a joint effort with the Alliance for Quality Education and Citizen Action, which seeks to expand access to high-quality early learning opportunities. CCI is also a member of the Campaign for Children in New York City.

I want to thank the legislative leaders here today for convening this hearing and providing the opportunity to testify about the Executive Budget proposals on Elementary and Secondary Education: Catherine Nolan, Chair, Assembly Education Committee; John Flanagan, Chair, Senate Education Committee, Herman D. Farrell, Chair, the Assembly Ways and Means Committee and John DeFrancisco, Senate Finance Committee.

CCI also wants to recognize the critical leadership the state legislature has played in expanding early childhood education in New York State through the Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) program. Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, in particular, deserves special gratitude for his role in championing the launch of UPK as a key part of education reform and for his leading in the implementation that has grown to now serve 100,000 children across the state.

The Governor's Education Reform Commission has now picked up the torch, and made early childhood education a centerpiece of their first report. The commissioners acknowledged the extensive research on the power of high-quality early education, noting that "the education pipeline starts at birth for students" and calling for "seamless education that supports a student from pre-kindergarten through college and then career." The commission called for new investment in full-day Pre-K services as the next strategic step in building that pipeline.

As you know, the Governor has now embraced that recommendation with his a plan for a **“robust,” high-quality, full-day prekindergarten program**, starting with the most at-risk children first. **We fully support this proposal as the best next step to build on the success of the state’s Universal Prekindergarten effort** and believe it also aligns strongly with the Regents latest policy statement on early childhood education. As an organization that focuses on the early years, CCI’s testimony focuses on this proposal in particular. We also urge the legislature to take steps to protect existing UPK services and to be sure that state aid is robust enough to protect Kindergarten services. Both are at risk in these challenging economic times.

### **Full-Day Prekindergarten: Significant Next Step**

The Governor’s plan for a **new and “robust” full-day prekindergarten program**, starting with our state’s highest needs students, **represents a critical breakthrough in state education policy**, which recognizes the power of early childhood education to close the achievement gap and improve school success. Specifically, CCI wants to highlight

- ✓ **Full-day is more educationally effective**, prepares children to succeed in school and reading on grade level by third grade.
- ✓ **Full-day service will also expand access to quality early education**, since many families need more than a part-day service.
- ✓ **The focus on quality is critical to the success of the new initiative**, with **commitment to qualified teachers, effective teaching and quality learning environment**.
- ✓ **The new investment particularly strategic**, since the **Pre-K investment creates a singular link between K-12 and early childhood services**, to build an effective, quality “education pipeline” envisioned by the Governor’s Education Reform Commission.

Thus, the Governor’s new initiative offers significant potential to build on, as a key, evidence-based education reform strategy. CCI also offers several recommendations on how to build on the potential of the new initiative:

- **Make the new full-day Pre-K initiative a permanent part of state Pre-K aid**, with plan to increase the program over time.
- **Make sure the new full-day Pre-K aid includes the same mandate for investment in community programs as existing UPK aid does**.
- **Include an intentional strategy to achieve the quality benchmarks laid out in the budget proposal**, with appropriate supports and investment in quality so that programs can reach those benchmarks.

**In addition, CCI and other early childhood advocates urge the legislature to take additional steps to protect funding for the existing Universal Prekindergarten program. As**

a voluntary, non-mandated educational service, UPK is losing ground, dropping from \$452 million just four years ago to \$385 million this year.

**We also urge legislators to adequately and equitably fund K-12 education aid to prevent districts from reducing access to Kindergarten for five-year-olds.** The current fiscal climate is creating severe threats to these critically important components of the state's P-12 education system. A growing number of districts around the state are putting cuts to Kindergarten on the table – cutting back full-day to half-day or eliminating Kindergarten altogether.

### **Early Childhood Education: Keeping the Promise**

CCI is proud of the state's Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) program, which now serves approximately 100,000 four-year-olds. This significant accomplishment, enacted as a key component of education has received national recognition and **the current investment of \$385 million represents the state's single largest investment of its own revenues in expanding early learning opportunities and the only publicly-funded early childhood program open to all.** That status is **particularly important in extending early learning opportunities to immigrant children and children from low-income working parents who can't afford private tuition.** The state's recent efforts to position Pre-K as the gateway for the Common Core standards also helps strengthen and align early education and help New York realize its vision of a P-12 education system.

CCI champions early childhood education based on the consistent and highly-regarded research that documents the strong link between high-quality early education opportunities for children and their future education success. These investments reap significant financial returns as well, because they save the state money on expensive remediation efforts and focus resources on effectively closing the achievement gap. Indeed, studies show that graduates of high-quality early childhood programs are far more likely to be reading on grade level at third grade, graduate high school and twice as likely to go on to college.<sup>1</sup> National longitudinal studies show that by age 40, these students have significantly higher earnings as well and are more likely to be tax-paying productive citizens. All of these findings underscore the wisdom of the state's UPK investment.

### **Full-Day Advantage**

The Governor's plan for a new and "robust" full-day prekindergarten program, starting with our state's highest-need students represents a critical next step in the state's Pre-K effort. Both national studies and those conducted in New York State show that full-day Pre-K is more educationally-effective than a part-day service. Today, many states including neighboring New Jersey fund the six-hour preschool day advocated by educators and researchers in New York. Research documents that children in full-day Pre-K have better language and math skills than those who attend three hours or less. Full-day services are also more effective in closing the

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<sup>1</sup> See Perry Preschool Project research at [www.highscope.org](http://www.highscope.org), which follows graduates of early education to age 40. The National Institute for Early Education Research also has a range of studies showing similar results for scaled up statewide preschool programs, available at [www.nieer.org](http://www.nieer.org).

achievement gap between higher income and lower income children. The research clearly supports the value of full day early learning experiences for the most at risk children.<sup>2</sup>

**Yet the new full-day initiative needs to be anchored in Pre-K aid going forward as a core part of state Pre-K aid, to build on the progress already made in making Universal Prekindergarten available.** As a core part of state Pre-K aid, districts will also see the new program as one with a future that can be sustained. Many districts, including the Big Five, rural districts and high-need districts on Long Island have reported the lack of full-day options has impeded expansion of local Pre-K programs.<sup>3</sup> Families find it challenging to take advantage of a part-day service, making it difficult for many districts to fill part-day seats. Some districts, such as New York City and Yonkers, have long waiting lists for full-day seats, while part-day seats cannot be filled. Rural districts find it hard to enroll children for a part-day service, because of the simple logistics. Students must travel a half hour or more on a bus for a part-day class.

For all these reasons, CCI urges that the new full-day program be incorporated into Pre-K aid and recognized as a first step in promoting quality and expanding access that can be sustained over time.

### **Full-Day Initiative Would Benefit from Intentional Strategy and Appropriate Supports to Meet Quality Benchmarks**

CCI applauds the vision now included in the executive budget that calls for the new full-day initiative to be “robust” and of high-quality. Specifically, the language which recognizes the need for certified teachers, quality learning environments and attention to teaching strategies that focus on positive interactions between teachers and students. These are all critically important goals and parallel to the state’s current goals for K-12 education. The proposal builds on the Governor’s Education Reform Commission recommendations which recognize the importance of investing in research-based early learning models and qualified, effective teachers.

**But the proposal does not yet include an intentional strategy, appropriate supports and investment in quality assurance to reach those benchmarks, including professional development and technical assistance.** This new effort should be aligned with the significant work completed in development of Pre-K standards linked to the Common Core, as well as work that has been done in developing Early Learning Guidelines for serving children from birth to five and the development of QUALITYstarsNY, a statewide system to measure and improve the quality of programs in all settings. Several school districts, such as New York City, have developed strategies for assessing programs and student progress in developing the skills for school success. Districts on Long Island are currently working with public education leaders, including principals and superintendents, to ground them in best practices for early childhood programs. The new Pre-K program offers an opportunity to incorporate both the tools and technical assistance to support programs in meeting quality benchmarks.

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<sup>2</sup> See Barnett et.al, “*Is More Better? The Effects of Full Day v Half Day* available at [www.nieer.org](http://www.nieer.org); See also “Research Briefing: *The Full-Day Advantage*” available at [www.winningbeginningny.org](http://www.winningbeginningny.org).

<sup>3</sup> See the reports from the Early Years Institute on Long Island at [www.eyi.org](http://www.eyi.org) and also “Strengthening the Pre-K Investment,” at [www.winningbeginningny.org](http://www.winningbeginningny.org). Both report on NY state implementation of UPK and document the challenges districts face in trying to fill part-day seats.

## **Opportunity to Build on Pre-K's Strategic Linkage and Make the Most of Scarce Resources**

Pre-K creates a strategic linkage between public schools and early childhood programs, because of its mandate for investment in community organizations. UPK occupies a unique position in state educational services, with its mandate for 10 percent of the investment to be made in early childhood programs in the community, such as child care, Head Start and Preschool Special Education. With most of the state's four-year-olds already enrolled in an early childhood program, this mandate wisely gave the state an opportunity to use UPK funding to leverage other funding, capacity and expertise of early childhood professionals.

Many of the community programs offer capacity and space lacking in crowded districts, as well as extended hours that working families need. The strategy also provided an opportunity to expand capacity to serve children with special needs with their typically-developing peers. The state's diverse system for service delivery has generated notice from national experts and helped local districts and early childhood professionals develop highly-effective early learning models that deliver services to younger children as well. The community programs are essentially feeder schools to the K-12 system and provide the potential to align teaching and learning and achieve better outcomes for children.

The strategy has been embraced widely across the state, with 60% of the UPK services now offered in community-based early childhood programs. This has created new opportunities for partnerships between public school educators and those working in the community, and led to significant learning and new partnerships to not only support learning but also to support smooth transitions into the K-12 system.

Some districts have taken full advantage of the opportunity to leverage resources and align services and the recent introduction of strategies that position PreK as the gateway to the Common Core creates additional momentum. These efforts put the state on a pathway to fulfill the vision of the Regents to create a continuum of services from birth to third grade, and to strengthen the state's P-12 system. The new initiative similarly helps meet the Governor's Ed Reform Commission vision of a pipeline of educational services starting from birth.

But the Executive Budget proposal does not clearly indicate whether the new full-day initiative would include and build on this critical and important policy that mandates investment in community programs. CCI urges the state to do just that, so this new effort can further build on the state's UPK effort as a critical component in creating that pipeline.

### **Protect Current UPK funding**

Even as we focus on the compelling new full-day proposal, we don't want to lose sight of protecting the current state investment in Universal Prekindergarten, which constitutes the state's single largest investment of its own revenues in early childhood education. We proudly support the UPK program as the only early childhood offering opened to all children, without means-testing and in diverse settings. The 100,000 children supported with Pre-K funding include the

children of immigrants, working class and other families who can't qualify for or afford private tuition.

But the current \$385 million investment also represents a significant loss from the \$452M allocation of just five years ago. The \$67 Million loss was returned to the state's general revenue fund and nearly a third of the state's school districts are currently not eligible to participate in the state's UPK effort. The failure to use the funding is due a range of factors; including the lack of funding to support full-day options and the need to be sure the funding formula appropriately supports the cost of providing services. We are eager to work with state policymakers to help redesign Pre-K aid to make the program robust and sustainable into the future, and we intend to do that in the coming year. In the short term, in this legislative session, we urge the state to protect the current investment by ensuring that any unused allocation is reappropriated to other districts eager to enroll Pre-K students. There are districts around the state that have waiting lists for Pre-K and are eager to enroll more students. It is urgent that we protect the UPK funding against further loss and make sure these students have access to prek services.

### **Protect Kindergarten Services**

CCI and other early childhood and public school advocates and experts have watched with alarm as a growing number of districts propose cutting back or even eliminating Kindergarten services. To date, local school boards – driven by community sentiment – have mostly resisted the cuts in their final budgets. Yet with the compulsory school age at six, Kindergarten remains a non-mandated, voluntary service. This year, the threats are increasing. Even as I testify here today, I have been informed that districts in Broome County, Long Island and Westchester are considering serious reductions and even elimination of Kindergarten in the coming year.

Kindergarten is an absolutely essential component of the public education in New York, and the Board of Regents have long called for dropping the compulsory school age to 5 to ensure access for all children in every district. Children can't enter the first grade without the grounding that is now offered in kindergarten, which includes both social skills and the basics for learning reading and math. Without a quality early education, which includes both Pre-K and K, the evidence shows students will start out behind, and stay behind – costing them, the schools, our families and our communities far more in the long run.

**It is essential that the legislature adequately and equitably fund K-12 education aid to prevent districts from reducing access to Kindergarten for five-year-olds.**

In the long-term, CCI supports moving the compulsory age for school attendance to five and our organization helped champion New York City's efforts to mandate Kindergarten attendance this year. We were happy to follow the good example of Syracuse in making the service available to all children. Kindergarten is critical to establishing the educational pipeline envisioned by the research, by our own Board of Regents and most recently by the Governor's New York Education Reform Commission.