

Testimony to the New York State Joint Legislative Budget Hearing for Human Services

On Behalf of Wonderschool

Regarding the Executive Budget's Proposal on Child Care Support Centers

February 12, 2025

Esteemed Chairs and Members of the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing for Human Services:

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on behalf of Wonderschool. My name is Chris Bennett, I am the Co-Founder & CEO of Wonderschool.

I am here to address the Executive Budget's proposal on the creation of child care support centers to implement early childhood education substitute teacher pools. Wonderschool is the leading provider of innovative solutions for the child care industry, and we commend the Governor's commitment to addressing the critical shortage of substitute teachers in early childhood education settings.

The Need for Substitute Teachers

The shortage of substitute teachers is a significant challenge faced by child care providers across New York State. This shortage leads to disruptions in care, limits program quality, and creates additional stress for already overburdened child care professionals. When a teacher is absent and no substitute is available, child care centers may be forced to close classrooms or even the entire facility for the day. This results in parents and families missing work, causing lost wages and productivity, and ultimately impacting the state's economy. The Executive Budget's proposal to establish child care support centers is a crucial step toward addressing this critical need.

Wonderschool's Expertise

Wonderschool has a proven track record of success in implementing substitute teacher pools. In Mississippi, our partnership with the Mississippi Department of Health and Human Services resulted in the creation of a statewide substitute teaching pool. Since beginning operation on November 1, 2023, Wonderschool has recruited and trained over 450 early childhood educator substitute teachers. These individuals have worked over 50,000 hours over 7,000 individual substitute jobs postings. This initiative has significantly improved the availability of substitute teachers, particularly in underserved communities.

Recommendations for New York State

We believe the Executive Budget's proposal provides a strong foundation for establishing a successful substitute teacher pool system in New York. However, we propose the following amendments to optimize the program's effectiveness and increase the chances of success:

- **Statewide Digital Platform:** The legislation should require child care support centers to utilize a statewide digital platform to facilitate the efficient matching of substitute teachers with child care providers. This platform should also streamline administrative processes such as recruitment, background checks, substitute teacher payments, and training verification.
- **Collaboration with CCR&Rs:** Child Care Resource and Referral agencies (CCR&Rs) possess extensive knowledge of local child care needs and training requirements. We recommend integrating CCR&Rs into the substitute teacher pool model to provide high-quality training and support for substitute teachers.

- **Incentives and Support:** The program should include mechanisms to incentivize participation by child care providers and substitute teachers, such as financial incentives, professional development opportunities, and streamlined administrative processes.
- **Data Collection and Evaluation:** The Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) should be mandated to collect data on program outcomes and report on key indicators such as substitute recruitment, deployment, training, service quality, and financial management. Armed with this data, OCFS will be able to effectively evaluate the program's success and make data-driven decisions to improve its impact.

Conclusion

Wonderschool is confident that, with the proposed amendments, New York State can establish a robust and effective substitute teacher pool system, leading the nation in this critical area. We are eager to collaborate with the state and other stakeholders to implement this vital program and ensure that all children in New York have access to high-quality early childhood education

Thank you for your consideration.

Chris Bennett
Co-Founder & CEO, Wonderschool