



LONG ISLAND'S EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION SYSTEM

Testimony to the NYS Early Childhood Advisory Council

April 25, 2017

Presented on behalf of the Child Care Council of Nassau, the Child
Care Council of Suffolk and The Long Island Pre-K Initiative



**CHILD CARE COUNCIL
OF SUFFOLK, INC.**

THE
**LONG ISLAND
PRE-K INITIATIVE**



**Child Care Council
of Nassau, Inc.**
Every Day Counts in the Life of a Child

Good afternoon. My name is Jennifer Rojas and I am the Associate Executive Director of the Child Care Council of Suffolk (“the Council”) on Long Island. I am testifying on behalf of the Long Island region, representing the Child Care Council of Suffolk, the Child Care Council of Nassau, and the Long Island Pre-K Initiative.

The Child Care Councils are the Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R) agencies for the 3 million residents of Long Island, and are dedicated to making child care work for all of our diverse communities. Both Councils are partners in the Long Island Pre-K Initiative, which is just one example of the regional collaborations underway on Long Island. Thank you for giving us this opportunity to share our concerns and ideas.

The mission of the Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) is to “...support[s] New York in building a comprehensive and sustainable early childhood system that will ensure success for all young children”.

My testimony today will discuss the challenges on Long Island in building such a system. I will specifically address two of the five guiding principles of the ECAC:

- Families are best supported with strong public policy and services promoting economic stability, self-sufficiency, and strong and resilient relationships; and
- New York’s plan can only be achieved by building connections among state, regional, and community strengths and by integrating resources into one unified system that works for children and families.

Before I get into the details, I want to stress an important point. We are facing a crisis in the child care field. Yet, it does not seem that the ECAC or state policy makers recognize the extent of the urgent situation on the ground. Families and child care providers are struggling to survive. Only 17 percent of eligible children are receiving a subsidy – and this is only going to get worse. Each week we see more providers closing down. So it is very difficult to discuss lofty goals and opportunities when the child care industry is literally falling apart. Moving forward we hope that the ECAC will collaborate more effectively with the CCR&R Network and regional efforts.

ECAC Guiding Principle: Families are best supported with strong public policy and services promoting economic stability, self-sufficiency, and strong and resilient relationships.

Quality child care is critical to promoting economic stability, self-sufficiency and positive early childhood relationships. Unfortunately, as the Empire Justice Center stated in their recent report, we are “straining New York’s child care program to the breaking point”.¹ On Long Island this is painfully real.

Quality child care has become much harder to find on Long Island. We have a growing population of lower-wage working families, an ever-increasing cost of living, and decreasing availability of child care subsidies. In Suffolk, our eligibility level is at 125 percent of poverty –

¹ Child Care in Crisis. Empire Justice Center, January 2017.

that is **\$30,375 for a family of 4**. (And, it is likely that due to the deep cuts to social service districts, this could go even lower.)

For context, a new report by the United Way puts the household survival budget in Suffolk County at \$90,324 for a home with 2 adults, 1 infant and 1 preschooler.² In Nassau it is \$80,940. Even a family with 2 adults working full-time at \$15/hour is not eligible for child care subsidy, nor can they afford the \$10,000 - \$15,000 annual cost of quality child care for 1 child.

Statewide, only 17 percent of eligible children are currently being reached by the child care subsidy program. Yet, funding continues to shrink. The child care field has been unable to secure funding to implement the new Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) regulations or to comply with the new minimum wage requirements. And then, after several years of stagnant funding – despite rising costs and increased need – this year the state budget included a cut of \$7 million to child care.

We are at a breaking point.

The significant lack of access to child care is magnified by Long Island's lack of state Pre-K funding. Only **27 percent** of Long Island's 4-year olds have access to state-funded Pre-K. Of the \$410 allocated since 2012, less than \$5 million (1%) came to Long Island. This is not because of lack of interest. It is a result of the targeted and constrained grants that have been issued over the past five years that precluded Long Island districts from applying for the funds.

For those families who are able to afford child care or Pre-K, finding **quality** care remains a challenge. The middle-class is shrinking, leaving fewer families able to afford quality child care. At the same time, the availability of child care subsidies has decreased. This has placed a financial strain on child care providers that has led to many programs closing, cutting costs or going "underground". The result is that all families on Long Island have fewer options for quality care.

The financial resources for quality improvement are also widely diffused. Every year the state budget allocates funding to the unions, QualityStarsNY, and CCR&Rs among others for training and professional development. While we coordinate with these entities and work together to reach all providers, it is not an efficient system when funds are so limited.

Recommendation #1: We need the ECAC and all of our statewide partners to work together to save the child care industry. The working families around the state need all of us to make sure there is affordable, quality care available so they can work and be self-sufficient, while their children thrive in a quality setting.

² Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed: A Study of Financial Hardship. United Way, Fall 2016.
www.UnitedWayAlice.org/NewYork

A strategic plan must be developed that:

- (1) addresses the needs of the families below 200% of poverty by increasing the funding for the existing subsidy program,
- (2) bridges the gap between what middle-income families can afford to pay and what it costs to provide quality child care, through tax incentives, technical support, education grants or other corporate subsidy models,
- (3) streamlines and eliminates duplication, and
- (4) builds on existing strengths and local infrastructure, especially with regard to quality initiatives.

We also wholeheartedly support the proposals put forward by Susan Antos of the Empire Justice Center in her February testimony regarding the exemption for parents on public assistance with infants.

ECAC Guiding Principle: New York's plan can only be achieved by building connections among state, regional, and community strengths and by integrating resources into one unified system that works for children and families

For many years I have carried around a graphic of the confusing and fragmented funding structure for early childhood on the state level. (See attached.) There are obviously many challenges to creating a more cohesive and efficient state early childhood system, but there are opportunities and examples of success on which we can build. ***The recommendations that I will discuss are focused on improving the delivery of early childhood services by building on regional strengths and better integrating efforts on the local level.***

Child Care Resource & Referral

There are 34 Resource & Referral (CCR&R) agencies around New York State that work to improve the quality and affordability of child care and preschool. Working directly with parents, providers and employers, the CCR&Rs are the on-the-ground institutions that have the expertise and relationships to strengthen child care. The CCR&Rs are an integral part of the child care "system"; yet have not been fully integrated on a state-wide level into the more recent efforts focused on quality and systems-building. This is a missed opportunity.

On Long Island, both the Child Care Council of Suffolk and the Child Care Council of Nassau have highly qualified, Master's level educators who provide professional development and on-site support to thousands of early childhood providers each year. Each Council has staff who are trained in the evidence-based High Scope model – the same model touted in the Perry Preschool study. We have worked together to begin expanding the use of this model in both community- and school-based settings.

Our Education departments also have expertise in infant/toddler best practices, promoting resiliency, working with trauma and appropriately managing challenging behaviors. We have nurses and nutritionists on staff and offer a range of technical assistance and coaching options based on the specific needs of each provider. This experience and direct relationship with the

providers should be leveraged and better integrated as the ECAC works to create a more unified system of early childhood.

Recommendation #2: Quality improvement efforts should build on existing strengths and not duplicate existing structures. The CCR&R network of agencies has the infrastructure, expertise and relationships to effectively assess and support quality in the local regions. Rather than continue to create new structures or require duplication of assessments and technical assistance, there should be much more coordination and integration of the work being done by the CCR&Rs (and other regional efforts) into the all quality improvement efforts.

Regional Approaches

In an effort to foster more collaboration between Pre-K and child care on the local level, the Long Island Pre-K Initiative was established. It is a partnership with Nassau BOCES, Eastern Suffolk BOCES, Western Suffolk BOCES, and the Child Care Councils of Nassau and Suffolk, focused on coordinating and leveraging existing resources on Long Island to improve the quality of Pre-K.

This effective model of local collaboration is working to ensure the on-the-ground success of Pre-K on Long Island – both in school-based and community-based settings. We have combined the early childhood expertise of the Child Care Councils with the infrastructure and public education strengths of the three BOCES on Long Island. This partnership is also working to break down the barriers between the public school Pre-K programs and the community based child care and early childhood programs on the local level. We have several examples of successful collaboration between the Child Care Councils to public school Pre-K programs, as well as situations where public schools sought out local child care programs to provide their Pre-K.

Since Pre-K and child care remain completely isolated from each other in the state budget and operations, we are working on systems-building on the local level.

Recommendation #3: Support regional approaches to quality improvement and coordination that reflect the unique local needs and strengths. This type of collaboration is breaking down silos and supporting local system-building efforts. The Long Island Pre-K Initiative is building on existing strengths and infrastructure rather than creating a new entity or structure. This could also be another effective model to support the implementation QualityStarsNY. (A more detailed description of the Initiative is attached.)

Urban/Suburban/Rural Differences

Suburban areas have much different needs than the more urban areas of our state. Rural communities face even different challenges. **We cannot have a one size fits all approach to building an early childhood system.** It is essential to build on local resources and infrastructure.

For example, Long Island has 124 school districts, which are independent from the local governments which oversee child care. This makes collaboration a challenge, and also diffuses

the limited resources that are allocated to Long Island's children. The Long Island Pre-K Initiative I just discussed is one effort to address this fractured structure locally.

Our structures also hide the significant income disparities in our towns and school districts. While we only have 10 school districts that are classified as "high-need", almost 40% of all students in Suffolk County are "economically disadvantaged" according to New York State Education Department statistics.³ In other words, the "affluent" districts have clusters of high need students are not "seen" in district level statistics. As a result, almost all of Long Island's school districts have been ineligible to apply for the last several rounds of Pre-K funding that was targeted to high-need districts only, even though there are high-need children in those districts.

Recommendation #4: Pre-K funding should be flexible to allow regional collaboration. School districts should be able to join together to offer a coordinated Pre-K program, or a regional entity (such as a BOCES or other regional non-profit) should have the opportunity to apply for Pre-K funding to provide service across district lines. We have heard significant support on Long Island – from Superintendents and families – that an "Island-wide" program for Pre-K would work best, allowing parents to choose programs regardless of school district. Just like Pre-K for All in NYC, Long Island families should have broader access to Pre-K.

Another concern is the shift to 3-year olds in Pre-K, when many of the counties outside of major cities are unable to serve most 4-year olds. As I mentioned, only 27 percent of 4 year olds on Long Island can be served in state-funded Pre-K. And, many school districts are unable to meet the very different needs of such young children. Yet, the state budget has allocated funding for Pre-K for 3-year olds over the past several years (and has been unable to fully allocate all funding).

Recommendation #5: We strongly encourage the ECAC to take a position against new Pre-K funding for 3-year olds, at least until a majority of 4-year olds can be served throughout the state. Any funding for 3-year olds should be targeted to the child care system in a way that expands access and strengthens quality.

We urge the ECAC to act on these critical issues facing families with young children. We can no longer be satisfied with the tiny morsels of funding and support that are approved as an after-thought. Together we need to elevate the pressure on our state to expand access to quality early childhood programs.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. We look forward to working with all of our colleagues around the state to fight for access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education for all of our communities.

³ New York State Education Department. <https://data.nysed.gov/enrollment.php?year=2016&county=58>

A Snapshot of New York's Early Childhood "System"



