



Preparing Our Children for School Success:

A Look at the First Year
of Universal Pre-K in
New York City



CITIZENS' COMMITTEE for CHILDREN
OF NEW YORK INC.

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Task Force Co-Chair

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Staff Associate for Education and Child Care

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Recent research on early brain development has shown that quality early learning experiences have a profound and lasting effect on the developmental, academic, and social needs of our nation's youngest children. Specifically, quality early education has been linked to reductions in dropout and illiteracy rates as well as referrals to special education. Universal Pre-Kindergarten is one of several program strategies that states can implement as part of a comprehensive early childhood policy that helps to ensure school readiness for all children and supports parent participation in the workforce. Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, Inc. (CCC) has long recognized the need to establish an early care and education program and advocated for a Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPre-K) program in New York State.

The Legislation

In August of 1997, groundbreaking education legislation entitled Learning, Achieving, and Developing by Directing Educational Resources (L.A.D.D.E.R.) was passed by the New York State Legislature and signed by the Governor creating the UPre-K program which offers four-year olds the opportunity to receive a free, half-day pre-kindergarten experience. The L.A.D.D.E.R. legislation also includes other initiatives such as Early Grade Class Size Reduction, Full-Day Kindergarten, and minor maintenance of school classrooms and buildings.

According to the law, the Universal Pre-K program is to be made available to all four-year-olds by the 2001-2002 school year. To ensure the goal of full implementation, the legislation requires collaborative efforts between school districts and day care providers, Head Start programs, and other community-based child care and early education programs. At least ten percent of the total grant awarded to school districts must be set aside for these eligible community-based programs.

Beginning a Dialogue about UPre-K

Because of our commitment to and belief in the value of UPre-K, CCC initiated steps to educate New Yorkers about the program. To facilitate a thoughtful planning process that incorporated a healthy dialogue with community-based organiza-

tions, CCC hosted a conference in January of 1998, "A Step Up for Kids: Universal Pre-Kindergarten in New York City." The conference was attended by over 300 people who heard from and posed questions to New York City and State administrators of the UPre-K program, which was to serve 14,000 children in New York City by the following September. Pamela Shapiro, Deputy Director of the Georgia Office of School Readiness, which implemented the country's first Universal Pre-K program, was the Keynote Speaker. The Georgia UPre-K program relies closely on community-based organizations, private nursery schools, and public schools to deliver services to 4-year-olds and their families. The conference served as a springboard for New York City's planning and implementation process for UPre-K.

Aware that this massive undertaking needed parental support and interest to succeed, CCC developed a brochure entitled "Earlier is Better." The brochure served as both a parent education and citizen action tool that included basic information about the program and postcards that could be mailed to the Chancellor and elected officials urging them to support the program and allocate sufficient resources to ensure program quality. The brochure, available in both English and Spanish, was distributed widely by community school districts, day care centers, religious institutions, community boards, settlement houses, community-based organizations and at street fairs throughout the City.

Also during the summer of 1998, CCC and State Communities Aid Association (SCAA), worked with the Advertising Council and Ad Club of New York to develop five print ads to raise the public awareness of the program and inform parents on how to enroll their child. With space donated by the New York Times, four ads were placed generating approximately 100 phone calls each. All callers received information packets containing the UPre-K brochure in English or Spanish, a Board of Education (BOE) UPre-K application, the list of the Early Childhood Supervisors in each school district, CCC's *Action Guide*, and a list of child care resource and referral agencies for parents in need of child care. In addition, wall and letter size duplications of the ads

were mailed to child care centers, Head Start programs, foster care agencies, public libraries, preventive service programs, public libraries, and family health clinics. CCC and SCAA also worked with the Ad Council and Ad Club on an out-of-door campaign producing mall posters, billboards and movie slides for placement in donated space throughout the State.

The Funding Challenge

According to the UPre-K enabling legislation, over the five-year phase-in period anticipated funding levels would increase from \$50 million in 1998 to \$100 million in 1999-2000, \$225 million in 2000-01, and \$500 million in 2001-02, and thereafter. These amounts were based on a per child cost of \$2,000. The New York State Assembly added \$17 million to the original \$50 million in 1998, bringing the total in State funds to \$67 million with a per child expenditure of \$2,700. In New York City, the Board of Education determined that it was not able to provide a quality Pre-K experience with only state resources, and provided an additional \$5 million the first year, increasing the City's per child expenditure to \$3,600.

Overcoming overwhelming skepticism about New York City's ability to begin the program in September of 1998, the Board of Education and the 32 school districts did a remarkable job of enrolling 13,796 children in Universal Pre-K, or 76% of the statewide total (18,906 children). In September 1999, 28,000 children are projected to enroll in UPre-K in New York City. An additional 16,000 are expected to enroll in the rest of the State, bringing the total to 44,000 statewide.

Uncertain political support threatens the future success and full implementation of UPre-K. Last January, in his Executive Budget, Governor George Pataki backed away from his promise to provide universal access to pre-kindergarten for 4-year-olds, proposing instead a \$200 million Educational Improvement Block Grant that combined all of the education initiatives included in the 1997 L.A.D.D.E.R. legislation into one funding source. Governor Pataki argued that a block grant would allow school districts to spend resources based upon local education priorities.

The Statewide Coalition to Save Universal Pre-K,

of which CCC is a member, estimated that \$130 million would be needed in the FY2000 budget to adequately fund UPre-K alone, illustrating the block grant's shortfall. The Coalition's strategy to save UPre-K and the other L.A.D.D.E.R. initiatives involved a postcard campaign to New York State elected officials as well as intensive advocacy that included a press conference, a series of illustrations in the *Legislative Gazette*, legislative meetings, petitions, and media coverage.

After lengthy budget negotiations, the State Legislature and the Governor agreed to "unblock" the L.A.D.D.E.R. programs and restore them with targeted funding. UPre-K was allocated \$100 million. While this amount was the original proposed allocation specified in the legislation, it is not sufficient to serve 44,000 students at the higher minimum per child cost of \$2,700. New York City has agreed to augment State funding for the program with local dollars to meet our enrollment target of 28,000 students, however, this may not be the case statewide. This year's discourse about UPre-K clearly demonstrates the lack of financial commitment for UPre-K and severely compromises school districts' ability to plan effectively and sufficiently for the future, threatening the promise of universal access for all 4-year-olds by the 2001-2002 school year.

What We Did

Between October 1998 and May 1999, CCC's Universal Child Care Task Force conducted a monitoring project of New York City's UPre-K Program's first year of implementation. The study incorporated views of parents and Early Childhood Supervisors in 12 community school districts. A survey was sent to 250 parents who called CCC for UPre-K information during the summer of 1998. We received a 30% (N=76) response rate that included respondents from New York City and Long Island. The survey focused on outreach and enrollment as well as parent satisfaction and program quality.

Trained CCC volunteers also conducted interviews with the Early Childhood Supervisors from 12 community school districts. Districts were selected based on geographic location to get a representative sample of school districts in all five boroughs as well as a combination of public school and community-

based UPre-K seat allocations. The district survey focused on outreach and enrollment, parent satisfaction and program quality, instructional support and site selection, and UPre-K Advisory Boards.

What We Found

The results of our study confirm anecdotal evidence of the overall success of Universal Pre-K. We found that parents were generally pleased with the quality of the program, but were somewhat frustrated by the enrollment process and the lack of wrap-around programs to provide a full day of care. School districts reported that Advisory Boards played a significant role in the program's success and urged that they be maintained. This policy brief highlights our findings and offers several modest recommendations that may be useful in the Board of Education's efforts to implement a quality Pre-K program for 4 year olds.

Inconsistent Enrollment Process Frustrates Parents

After the UPre-K enabling legislation passed in August of 1997, the NYC Board of Education and other school districts around the State had only a few months to plan for and enroll a projected 14,000 children by the following September. The Board of Education devolved substantial authority for the administration of UPre-K to the community school boards. Each NYC school district was responsible for developing its own outreach strategy to let parents know about the new program. We found that the level of outreach activities varied for each school district and included distribution of flyers, local newspaper advertisements, presentations at community and school meetings, and radio announcements. The school districts surveyed indicated that similar kinds of outreach activities would continue in year two.

Each school district was also responsible for developing its own enrollment procedures, with priority to be given to children from low-income families as mandated by New York State in the program's phase-in period. We found that the enrollment processes varied greatly across districts, causing confusion among parents throughout the City. For example, one district allocated all of its seats through a basic lottery

system, while another gave preference to low-income children, and allocated the remaining seats on a first come, first serve basis. Another district screened children for "educational need."

Eighteen parents responded that they had applied for UPre-K, and one-third of them (6), indicated that the application process was difficult. Parents reported difficulty obtaining information about UPre-K, the status of their application, and reaching the appropriate person at the school district office to answer questions. Many parents called CCC for additional information, wanting to know what district they lived in and asking for help in obtaining enrollment information from the districts.

When asked to describe the application process one parent stated, "I got tired of calling so many times and getting no response. Please help me with this matter. My son needs to be in school."

RECOMMENDATION

CCC acknowledges the Board of Education's efforts to successfully enroll nearly 14,000 children by encouraging individual school districts and community-based providers to conduct outreach to families. We believe, however, that the outreach and enrollment processes can be strengthened and recommend that the Board of Education do the following: (1) develop a comprehensive citywide public education campaign about UPre-K that would include posters and brochures distributed to institutions frequented by children and families including schools, community-based early childhood providers, religious institutions, and Child Health Clinics, as well as public service announcements on radio and television; and (2) develop enrollment information kits for parents that include a standard application, information on documents and health requirements necessary for enrollment, explicit instructions on where to apply and/or where to call for information, deadlines for application submission, and procedures for enrollment notification.

Parents Want a Full-day Program

The pressures of welfare reform and the increasing number of families in which both parents must work contribute to the growing demand for child care and early childhood education programs. According to a study conducted by The Early Childhood Strategic Group, sixty-nine percent of parents indicated a need for full-day (until 3:00 p.m.) or extended-day (until 6:00 p.m.) programs. CCC found that of the ten parents surveyed who decided not to enroll their child in UPre-K after going through the application process, all requested either a full or extended-day program. Three parents rejected the offer of a half-day program because they needed to have their child in a full or extended-day program. One parent expressed frustration with the half-day UPre-K slot she was allocated. When asked whether she would apply if she had another child she stated,

“Yes, if I could find a facility that would keep my child all day. It is an inconvenience to look for someone to pick him up in the middle of the day and send him somewhere else for the other half of the day while I work.”

Another parent stated,

“I would apply only if an extended-day program was available. Half-day programs do not accommodate single working parents.”

Four of the twelve school districts surveyed conducted their own surveys to determine the needs of parents and found an overwhelming preference for full or extended-day programs. Nine of the twelve school districts CCC surveyed reported that parents ranked full-day and/or extended day as the most requested program option. Moreover, half of the school districts reported that numbers of parents rejected half-day programs, because they needed full-day or extended-day programs. One Early Childhood Supervisor estimated that as many as 700 parents, half of the applicants, rejected half-day programs. Another reported that a large number of welfare families needed full-day programs due to work participation requirements, and therefore were unable to take advantage of the program.

RECOMMENDATION

Our study found that many parents preferred full or extended-day programs in order to work. To meet the needs of parents, CCC recommends the following: (1) the Board of Education should continue to work with the Agency for Child Development to provide the maximum number of full-day and extended-day seats in the community and sponsor blended funding workshops for child care and Head Start programs so they learn how to make use of both sources of funding to pay for a full-day or extended-day of care; and (2) New York State should assess the possibilities of linking UPre-K expansion to the expansion of child care with new State funding in order to provide for full-day or extended-day programs.

Parents are Satisfied with the Quality of UPre-K

Each school district developed its own criteria for evaluating community-based programs they were considering for UPre-K contracts, which could have resulted in inconsistency in the quality and standards of UPre-K programs throughout the City. Instead, we were pleased to find that all of the parents surveyed who enrolled their children either in a public school or community-based UPre-K program believed their child was having a good experience and would recommend it to other parents.

One parent stated “the program is wonderful so far. The teachers are good and my child is really happy. I think the teaching philosophy is better and more updated than that of the private nursery school I had my child in.”

Each school district reported that a curriculum was used in all UPre-K programs. Curricula that were mentioned included the Super Start curriculum (an existing BOE Pre-K program); “3, 4 Open the Door”; and the Board of Education Curriculum Guide. In accordance with the State legislation, all of the teachers in the public schools were either certified or close to certification. The school districts were not responsible for hiring teachers for non-BOE UPre-K programs.

With regard to program quality, one Early Childhood Supervisor expressed concern that she had no way to assure the quality of community-based Pre-K programs. She explained that there was neither staff available to monitor teachers nor resources available to make site visits to the different programs. She believed this lack of quality oversight needed to be corrected in the next stage of program implementation.

RECOMMENDATION

We are aware of and support the Board of Education's efforts to develop Universal Pre-Kindergarten program standards to ensure quality programming throughout the City for both BOE and community-based programs for 4 year olds. CCC recommends that the Board of Education develop criteria and a plan for school districts to monitor community-based and public school operated UPre-K programs.

Advisory Boards Make a Difference

The UPre-K legislation required participating school districts to create Advisory Boards responsible for the planning and implementation of the first year of the program. In New York City, Advisory Boards were created for each of the 32 school districts. Across the school districts, Advisory Boards included representatives from the school district, the United Federation of Teachers, community-based early childhood programs, community groups, local colleges as well as parents, clergy and elected officials.

All of the districts surveyed stated that there were many positive aspects of the UPre-K Advisory Boards including the collaborative process, the commitment to the program, and the diversity of the Boards. The main challenge faced by the school districts surveyed was obtaining consensus due to the size and diversity of the boards. Because of their commitment to be inclusive and ensure the success of UPre-K, each district surveyed planned to continue the Advisory Boards even though they are not required by the State.

RECOMMENDATION

With the support of the Board of Education, the district UPre-K Advisory Boards were successful in planning and implementing the program. CCC recommends the integration of UPre-K Advisory Boards and other boards/committees for early education programs in each school district to streamline program planning and development activities, and promote program coordination.

The Future of UPre-K

Our study found that overall, the implementation of UPre-K in its first year was highly successful — parents wanted the program and were satisfied with its quality, and the Board of Education collaborated effectively with community-based and other government agencies to find space for nearly 14,000 children.

The late adoption of the FY2000 State budget forced many school districts to forego participation in the program and caused others already participating to delay program expansion. Despite the overwhelming success of the first year and national support for quality early education, ongoing political leadership for this important program remains uncertain, threatening the future success and full-implementation of UPre-K. To ensure program continuity, thoughtful planning, and universality — every 4 year old can receive a free half-day of Pre-K—, the Governor and the Legislature must commit to meeting enrollment targets delineated in the 1997 L.A.D.D.E.R. Legislation and fully fund the program at \$2,700 per child.

**CITIZENS' COMMITTEE FOR CHILDREN OF NEW YORK IS AN INDEPENDENT NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION
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CITIZENS' COMMITTEE for CHILDREN OF NEW YORK, INC.

105 East 22nd Street, 7th Floor
New York, NY 10010

V: (212) 673-1800 F: (212) 979-5063

E-mail: info@kfny.org

website: www.kfny.org