

**Testimony before the Joint Assembly Standing Committees
on Labor, Children and Families, and Social Services
Hearing on Access to Quality Child Care for Working Families
January 10, 2008**

**Presented by
Jenn O'Connor, Senior Policy Associate
Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy**



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for people in need since 1872*

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Hello. I am Jenn O'Connor, Senior Policy Associate at the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy. Thank you for allowing me to present testimony today.

We are pleased that you are looking at the accessibility of quality child care for working families. Every year, a lack of access negatively impacts thousands of young children and their families. It is time that New York State addressed a number of issues. We are happy to direct our testimony to a few specific concerns.

Question #3: Have other countries, Canadian provinces, or states initiated incentives or plans to increase available quality care for children?

In order to increase available high-quality child care, New York must commit resources to retaining its current workforce and to recruiting new early care and education professionals. The shortage of qualified professionals is at an all-time high, with turnover running 30 to 40 percent in many community programs. A growing number of early care and education professionals are leaving the field permanently. Those who remain are poorly compensated and cannot afford to access continuing education programs. Without qualified staff, programs are bound to be of lower standards.

Twenty-one states have initiated the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Project. T.E.A.C.H. stands for Teacher Education and Compensation Helps. The Project gives scholarships to child care workers to complete course work in early childhood education and to increase their compensation. All scholarships link continuing education with increased compensation and require that recipients and their sponsoring child care programs share in the cost. New York should proceed with a similar early childhood workforce development program that supports early care and education professionals.

States have also invested in Quality Rating and Improvement Systems. In answer to Question #9 (Should the state invest in a statewide rating system that would promote quality child care in New York? How would such a system be structured?)—yes, New York should invest in a QRIS.

QRIS has been implemented in 14 states, with another 32 in the design phase. Such a system has the ability to enhance outcomes for children, educate both providers and consumers about quality, and maximize the use of resources through planning, coordination and common learning standards. A QRIS establishes standards of program

excellence. It provides a research-based tool for assessing the quality of early childhood programs and publicizes the results by assigning each program one to five stars. It provides a roadmap for provider improvement and an accountability measure for progress and funding. It offers a consumer guide that gives parents the tools to more effectively select an appropriate setting for their children. It also creates a comprehensive strategy for aligning the quality of programs and the investment of public resources.

New York State should:

- Allocate funding and staff resources to complete the design of a QRIS based upon the research conducted by the New York State QRIS Work Group. To move implementation forward, OCFS and SED staff should take the lead, joining with members of the NYS QRIS Work Group, to finalize rating standards, design the infrastructure, and estimate the costs for managing, staffing and evaluating the system;
- Collect baseline data on the quality of existing early childhood programs in order to assess the impact of a QRIS
- Allocate funding for several pilot sites to field test components of the QRIS. Several communities across the state have invested in quality improvements (e.g. incentives, technical assistance) and coordinated planning that would provide excellent sites for piloting QRIS to refine the initiative before rolling it out statewide.
- Issue a report and funding request for the following year to launch New York State's initiative.

Question #8: Are co-payments a barrier to families accessing affordable subsidized child care? If so, what are families doing in order to receive child care?

Yes, co-payments are a barrier. Nine states and two territories have recognized this and do not require families who live below the poverty level to pay a fee for child care. New York State regulations require that social services districts charge a minimum fee of \$1 to all families. Some counties require families under the FPL to pay as much as \$11 per week for child care.

New York is also one of only five states that does not have a uniform fee scale. The current parent fee scale is determined by a formula that results in similarly situated families paying dramatically different fees for child care, depending solely upon the county in which they reside. While some families only pay 10% of their marginal income, other families have to pay 35% of their marginal income for child care.

Families that cannot afford the co-pay often turn to unregulated care. This care may be unsafe, probably does not provide an educational component, and may be unreliable. Families should not be forced to turn to sometimes substandard care because of high

costs. The state should waive co-pays for families under the FPL and should standardize the fee scale.

While we're on the subject of barriers, I need to say a few words about child support enforcement regulations. The current requirement that all applicants and recipients of child care subsidies seek a child support order or lose eligibility for child care assistance should be repealed. While we believe that custodial parents should be encouraged to seek support orders from noncontributing parents, there are many reasons why families do not.

Sometimes a fragile relationship exists with the non-custodial parent that will quickly be severed when a court order is sought. In other instances, not seeking a court order is important for the safety of the custodial parent, as in cases where abuse has occurred. Child care intake workers are not specialists in domestic violence and have not been adequately trained to undertake such screenings.

In addition, low-income parents often have jobs that they cannot easily leave and the amount of time required to seek a court order is substantial for them – three to four days. Further, in instances when it is already a known that the non-custodial parent is incarcerated, disabled or on Supplemental Security Income, seeking such an order not only threatens the custodial parent's job security but wastes valuable family court time. Removing this barrier would allow more low-income parents to work while their children are in safe, stable settings.

Thank you for allowing us this time. We would like to take a moment to address one last issue. As you know, child care is primarily funded with federal dollars; in fact, the local share of child care spending in New York only amounts to approximately 7% of child care funding. The funding issue is troublesome to us because it means that our state relies on diminishing federal resources—namely, TANF. There are many demands on TANF dollars and over the last couple of years child care slots have been cut due to a loss of TANF funding to other issues. It is simply unacceptable that New York's children are almost solely dependant on federal funding for child care services. This situation demands a state and possibly local investment to ensure that no more slots are lost.

Thank you again.