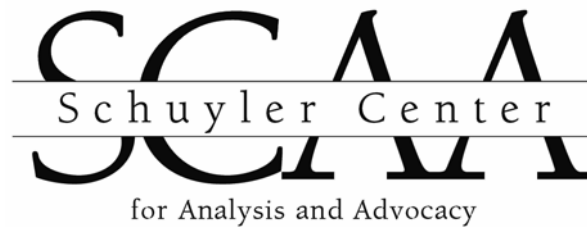


**Testimony for the Joint Fiscal Committees
on the SFY 2008-09 *Executive Budget*
Education Hearing
February 4, 2008**

**Presented by Karen Schimke, President and CEO
Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy**



*Shaping New York State public policy
for people in need since 1872*

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The Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy (SCAA) believes strongly in the importance of a high-quality early care and education system that benefits all children and families. SCAA co-convenes *Winning Beginning NY* and convenes the New York Children's Action Network (New York CAN). On behalf of both SCAA and those two advocacy groups, we applaud the Governor for his continued commitment to early care and education issues. His investment of \$79 million in universal prekindergarten brings that initiative's total funding for this year up to \$452 million. His support of a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) will improve the quality of child care programs for young children. Both are investments in the foundation of a system that serves children beginning at birth.

However, there is still work to be done to strengthen that foundation. The early care and education system is often treated as a number of autonomous parts, when it is actually an interlocking jigsaw puzzle of services.

You may ask yourselves why I mentioned child care programs a moment ago. I did so because child care is an integral part of the puzzle. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), "children from the lowest income families are found more likely to attend lower-quality programs. Children who are at-risk for school failure benefit the most from good early education, but they are the least likely to get it. Furthermore, many children from middle-class families also attend preschool programs of mediocre quality."

Both high-quality child care and a qualified early childhood workforce are important components of a successful education system. Without these components we have low-quality programs. And from low-quality programs come children who are not prepared for school—children who do not know how to socialize, or sit still, or pay attention. Children who are not ready to learn to read and to tie their shoes. I am here to remind you that education does not begin in kindergarten. Early care and education programs are where children learn the skills for school success. This system feeds the public school system. Don't we want our youngest children ready to learn when they get there?

The State of the State stressed the importance of strengthening our higher education system in order to keep young people in and attract young people to New York State. The Governor also discussed the importance of housing, safe streets, and pretty parks to building communities. It's true that young families want all that. But to truly boost the state's economy, we need to provide working families with the child care they require to go to work every day. If we want to keep our young people in the state we must bolster our higher education system. If we want to keep young families in the state we must provide them with high-quality early care and education.

SCAA requests that the Legislature acknowledge the interconnectedness of the early childhood system and the value of all its components and:

- o invest in the early childhood workforce;

- increase child care funding;
- increase funding for infant/toddler resource centers; and
- provide flexibility in Pre-K funding.

Early childhood workforce

Research shows that a qualified workforce is critical to achieving positive outcomes for children. NIEER has concluded that the quality of an early childhood program can be measured by staff credentials and compensation. Unfortunately, New York State's early childhood workforce is poorly compensated and without the resources to seek the education and credentials they need and want to provide quality care and education.

Did you know that 60% of Pre-K is provided in child care settings? Yet teachers in public school Pre-K programs are paid significantly more than those in community-based programs. As a result, community-based Pre-K teachers leave as soon as they are able to secure employment in the public school system. The results for children and families are disastrous—the shortage of qualified early childhood professionals is at an all-time high, with turnover at 30 to 40 percent in many community programs. A growing number of early childhood workers are leaving the field permanently. This is not good for the system and not good for children, who need stability in their learning environments.

We urge the Legislature to invest \$15 million in an Excellence in Early Childhood Workforce Initiative. This initiative provides a road map to building on the ambition, talent, and dedication of workers already on the job and to attracting the professionals to the field that the state needs to meet its goals to provide high-quality early care and education. It includes a professional development component, equitable compensation, and loan forgiveness.

Child care funding

Counties are burdened by costs and challenged by the need to provide a range of services. Therefore, we understand the state's rationale behind putting child care funding back in the Flexible Fund for Family Services (FFFS). At first glance, it appears that including child care in the FFFS allows counties flexibility. However, doing so actually forces counties to choose between funding competing children's issues—all of which are worthy.

Removing child care from the FFFS, as the Legislature so wisely did last year, will ensure that New York State, at a minimum, does not reduce its investment in services for working parents. This is important because over the past few years it has become increasingly difficult for low-income working families to access the subsidies that they need.

We urge the Legislature to transfer \$367 million in funding from the FFFS to the Child Care and Development Block Grant to prevent further erosion in child care funding and ensure that low-income working families have access to child care subsidies.

Obviously, child care is an essential component of a working family's life. This is the setting in which, starting in infancy, many children spend more than 10 hours a day. Without subsidy assistance, low-income working families who cannot afford child care on their own must make

choices about child care services that could put their children at risk. Often, these children end up in unregulated, unsafe, and substandard care. Sometimes parents are even forced to forgo employment to stay home with their children, leading them to seek public assistance. The research I told you about earlier documents the benefit to low-income children of high-quality child care programs.

In addition, the full implementation of universal Pre-K depends on the quality of our child care services. This is because high-quality child care provides the basis for success in Pre-K. The program's success also depends on child care because, as I said before, 60% of all Pre-K programs are housed in child care settings. Here is an example close to home. In Cohoes, there are 165 four-year olds. Fifty-five of them are in Pre-K—all in full-day, non-school settings. The school district obviously trusts these community-based organizations to provide these services to its children, and recognizes how essential full-day programs are.

It is imperative that the state subsidize slots for our lowest income and highest need children so that they are not left behind academically, and so that they are in safe, reliable settings while their parents are at work.

We urge the Legislature to add \$140 million for child care slots that have been lost over the past few years. This funding would restore the 14,000 lost slots and add 14,000 subsidized slots.

Infant/toddler resource centers

The Board of Regents has said that “We must recognize that our education system begins at birth.” The first three years of life is critically important to shaping the emotional, social, and cognitive development of children. With approximately 55% of all young children in New York in child care, there is a compelling need to focus specific resources on our very youngest learners. The seven Infant/Toddler Resource Centers are located in Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies across the state and work in every county to promote excellence in Infant/Toddler services in all settings. They are entering their fifth year without any increase in funding.

The Centers offer direct services to the early care and education community including intensive technical assistance, training, coaching, resource information, and linkages to other social and community supports. They also serve as a best practice information center for parents, the regional Office of Children and Family Services licensing offices, and other professionals working with this age group.

We urge the Legislature to allocate \$2.4 million to expand funding for Infant/Toddler Resource Centers, strengthen the capacity for coordination between Centers, and assess the impact of Center interventions on improving the quality of care for infants and toddlers.

Flexibility in Pre-K funding

We were particularly pleased to see that the *Executive Budget* kept the base per pupil funding for Pre-K at \$2,700 per child and that total allocations to school districts are set no lower than last

year. We believe that this funding not only allows districts to continue the programs they started in 2007—it unequivocally stakes out New York State’s long-term commitment to Pre-K. However, in order to provide high-quality programs appropriate to their individual needs, districts require flexibility in how they spend those dollars. They should be allowed to use funding from the baseline amount to support both the per/pupil rate and:

- a. Start-up expenses (including equipment and classroom modifications) and planning /coordination to ensure full participation by community-based organizations as well as public schools
- b. Full-day programs
- c. Developmentally-appropriate transportation to/from programs
- d. Professional development to increase both staff retention and staff qualifications
- e. Technical assistance and other supports to districts with high-need, at-risk children not currently participating in Pre-K

This flexibility will assist districts that are struggling to provide high-quality programs because they do not have the infrastructure, staff, or other supports necessary to create or continue a program. Again, let me reference Cohoes. The 55 four-year olds whom I spoke of are all in full-day programs, made possible by patching together funding. Cohoes obviously sees the value of offering full-day Pre-K, which is known to be more beneficial than part-day. Shouldn’t all children have access to full-day, and to other supports that make programs high-quality?

We urge you to allow districts this flexibility in the spending of Pre-K funding.

One last note. I know that the Education Committee will be considering the Governor’s Healthy Schools proposal. Without proper nutrition, children cannot learn—they cannot concentrate, they are ill more often, and, ultimately, they are lower performing. SCAA urges you to support both the Healthy Schools Act and the expansion of Child Health Plus, another initiative that will serve to increase the well-being of our youngest learners.

Let me conclude by saying that the Regents, in their Policy Statement on Early Education, wrote that “Early childhood education, for all children ages birth through grade 3, is an integrated system designed to ensure that each child receives a healthy start and attains the skills and concepts to have a successful academic experience in developmentally-appropriate programs. Components of the system include standards-based programs that start early, instruction by highly qualified persons, and an environment that coordinates comprehensive services and provides information and support to families.” SCAA strongly agrees with that view and urges the Legislature to support it by supporting the proposals outlined here today.

SCAA thanks you for your time and is, as always, available and ready to provide additional information. We are happy to work with your offices to ensure that New York’s children and their families receive high-quality early care and education.