

Child Care Challenges in New York State

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For too long, the focus in early care and education has been on quantity to the detriment of quality. Parents need affordable care that supports their ability to work. Children need early childhood programs that provide developmentally appropriate care and learning experiences and that have a workforce that is both educated and appropriately compensated. Unfortunately, the counties that administer child care in New York State face a number of challenges that result in barriers to access for families.

According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, in New York there are 767,952 families with 1,361,044 children below the age of five. Forty-one percent of those children live in low-income families, defined as below 200% of the federal poverty level. Forty-nine percent have a parent who is working full-time, full-year and 26% have a parent who is employed part-time or part-year. Many of these low-income families need child care.

A recent report by the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies cites the cost of child care in New York as among the highest in the nation. However, New York does not provide sufficient financial support to parents who cannot easily afford that care. Funding for child care subsidies has decreased from a high of \$929 million in FY2004-05 to this year's \$879 million.

In 2006, child care block grant funding supported a monthly average of approximately 70,000 families, with 118,013 children under five receiving subsidized child care. This is a substantial drop from those served in 2003 and 2004 when more than 83,000 families with over 140,000 children received subsidy assistance. A lack of financial assistance leaves many working families scrambling for child care. Some use a patchwork of caregivers to cover work schedules and many use unregulated care situations about whose safety and quality we know very little. These makeshift solutions can leave parents stressed and concerned about the well-being of their children. Employers are impacted when unreliable child care situations result in absenteeism and sub-standard work performance.

The funding decrease also resulted in fewer dollars to counties, forcing them to take steps such as changing eligibility levels and increasing co-payments. While the state maintains an eligibility level for subsidies of 200% of poverty, individual counties may choose to "prioritize" families, effectively setting different eligibility levels across the state. New York is also one of only five states that do not have a uniform fee scale, so similarly situated families pay dramatically different fees for child care, depending solely upon the county in which they reside. Some families pay 10% of their marginal income while other families pay 35%. These differences do not correlate with the cost of living within counties.

Counties face additional challenges from federal TANF requirements. The 2006 federal budget revised federal work participation rate requirements for TANF programs, including a 50% work participation rate for all families and a separately calculated 90% participation rate for two-parent families. In order to meet these requirements, counties encourage families to find child care quickly. This often results in the use of legally-exempt care, which meets minimal safety standards and rarely includes an educational component.

Another issue of concern is the current requirement that all applicants and recipients of child care subsidies seek a child support order or lose eligibility for child care assistance. The requirement is troublesome for a number of reasons. 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. Further, in instances when it is known that the non-custodial parent is incarcerated, disabled or on Supplemental Security Income, seeking such an order simply wastes valuable court time.

Another issue of critical importance is compensation for the early childhood workforce. Research shows that a qualified workforce is critical to achieving positive outcomes for children. Yet the state's early childhood workforce is poorly compensated and does not have the resources to seek the education and

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credentials it needs and wants to provide quality care and education. The state failed to renew the recruitment and retention program for the field and has not passed a loan forgiveness bill that would support the workforce in obtaining additional education. Further, 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 shortage of qualified early childhood professionals is at an all-time high, with turnover running 30 to 40% in many community programs. A growing number of early childhood workers are leaving the field permanently.

To address the issues outlined here and to maintain high-quality child care programs, New York State should assist counties in eliminating barriers to access and invest in its early childhood workforce. Only then will the state have a comprehensive system that works for working families. 🏠