READY FOR KINDERGARTEN INNOVATION FUND
RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE EDUCATION Reform COMMISSION
PUTTING STUDENTS FIRST

Executive Summary

The Ready for Kindergarten, Ready for College Campaign, a partnership of Winning Beginning NY, the Public Policy and Early Education Fund, the Alliance for Quality Education, and Citizen Action of New York, recommend that New York State create a Ready for Kindergarten Innovation Fund to assure that children enter Kindergarten prepared to succeed. Thoughtful investment in expanding access, together with measuring and improving early childhood program quality, are essential to ensure Kindergarten readiness and that public funds are allocated effectively to achieve measurable results for children.

There is consistent and highly regarded research that documents the strong links between high-quality early education opportunities for children and their future school success. New York State has taken several major steps to promote high-quality early education. The State is to be commended for the passage of Universal Prekindergarten legislation 15 years ago, which resulted in expanded early learning opportunities for close to 100,000 children. New York is also nationally recognized for its decision to invest in Pre-K programs in both public schools and community-based early childhood programs, leveraging existing private and public resources as well as the expertise and capacity across communities.

New York was one of the few states to include early childhood education in its successful Race to the Top (RTTT) application. The State Education Department recently invested RTTT dollars in targeted implementation of QUALITYstarsNY. QUALITYstarsNY is the State’s agreed-upon mechanism for improving early care and education and aligning that system with the school years.

In addition, QUALITYstarsNY is a way to ensure accountability for public expenditures. While the State should be commended for its current investment in Pre-K, an investment in expansion and improvement will allow the State to measure outcomes and cost effectiveness, thereby connecting results to dollars spent.

The Campaign recommends that New York State create a Ready for Kindergarten Innovation Fund in FY2013-14 that targets expansion of Pre-K in high-needs school districts, coupled with an investment in QUALITYstarsNY to build high-quality early care and education programs across the State.

Why Early Care and Education Matters

It is essential that education reform include quality early childhood education. Studies show that graduates of high-quality early care and education programs are far more likely to read at grade level and graduate from high school. They are twice as likely to go to college. They are also 40% less likely to need costly remedial services during their K-12 years, saving public schools an average of $2,500 to $9,500 per child. Conversely, children without access to high-quality early learning opportunities tend to start behind and stay behind—costing far more.

The research is also clear that the return on investment in early childhood education is linked to high-quality. Researchers have identified the key components of successful early childhood services associated with positive outcomes for children. Research shows that in order to ensure high quality outcomes, it is essential to focus on key components, such as qualified teachers, evidence-based curricula and data-driven instruction, as well as on expanding access.
PRINCIPLES FOR REFORM

Several key principles emerged from our research to help guide further expansion of the State’s early care and education work.

QUALITYstarsNY must serve as the mechanism by which the early care and education system is aligned. QUALITYstarsNY will improve program quality, increase teacher preparation, and increase family engagement, resulting in highly effective programs and children who are ready to enter school.

Pre-K must be part of a continuum of services from the prenatal months to third grade. Research shows investing early and continuously in young children is the most cost-effective and educationally-sound way to close the achievement gap. Such an approach can address developmental delays early and prevent the need for remedial services later. In addition, this continuum helps children transition successfully to elementary school and strengthens K-3 instruction.

The vision must be to provide high-quality early care and education to all children. While immediate investment should, due to budgetary constraints, be targeted to high-needs districts, we must keep our eye on the goal of universal access to high-quality Pre-K and early childhood programs for all children. Pre-K policies must be effectively and efficiently coordinated with community programs to ensure maximum options for families and effective use of all public and private resources.

Successful collaboration requires technical assistance and opportunities to learn. Most communities have only scratched the surface of collaboration, with school districts simply contracting with community-based programs. Those with true partnerships have often relied on local foundations or special grants to build the skills and relationships to foster successful Pre-K programming and to ensure local communities make the most of existing resources and capacity.

Proposal

Create a Ready for Kindergarten Innovation Fund in FY2013-14 that targets expansion of Pre-K in high-needs school districts, coupled with an investment in QUALITYstarsNY to build high-quality early care and education programs across the State.

Fund QUALITYstarsNY at $20 million, to enable this initial implementation.

QUALITYstarsNY

This investment in the professional development and training and other supports that QUALITYstarsNY provides would improve services for more than 54,000 children in over 700 programs in the next year of implementation.

The funding would be allocated as follows:

- $16.4 million investment in direct supports to programs and providers for quality improvement including professional development, technical assistance and financial rewards and incentives.
- $3.6 million investment in program assessment and rating, communication and outreach, data collection and system evaluation.
School districts that expand Pre-K under this initiative would be prioritized for participation in QUALITYstarsNY.

QUALITYstarsNY is a star rating and improvement system—much like those for restaurants and hotels—created to drive current and future State investments toward quality improvements in early learning programs, a strategic approach to ensuring both public and private dollars are used most effectively and efficiently to promote better outcomes for children. Fully implemented, it will provide parents with valuable tools to make good choices about early childhood programs. Equally important, it will put programs on the path of continuous quality improvement and offer assistance to those seeking to improve their rating.

The 2010-11 field test built the groundwork for successful implementation. $4M in RTTT federal education funding has been invested over a three year period to expand the program in school districts with persistently low-achieving schools. New York’s strategic investment in QUALITYstarsNY will help to position the State for future public and private funding opportunities, make us competitive with other states that have already committed funds to quality rating and improvement systems to improve young children’s learning outcomes, and improve educational outcomes for our state’s children while reducing the persistent achievement gap that has so troubled our urban and rural schools.

**Full-Day Pre-K Options**
The Fund would provide for New York State’s first full-day prekindergarten program and would also allow districts to expand access to current quality part-day programs. Districts would be allowed to use State Pre-K aid to pay for either option in both community and school settings, as a strategy to make the most effective and efficient use of public and private resources. An investment of $50 million in the Fund at a rate of $5,000 per child would allow school districts to expand services to children either by converting part-day services to full-day and/or expanding additional part-day opportunities where appropriate. At a rate of $5,000 per child an investment of $25 million would expand access for 5,000 children and would serve 20,000 with an investment of $100 million.

Districts would need to meet current MOE requirements, but would have new flexibility to use State aid to support full-day options in both schools and community settings.

Universal Pre-K legislation currently requires that at least 10% of Pre-K funding be invested in community programs to leverage investments and expertise in the community, promote quality standards, and align with K-12. Currently, almost 60% of the Pre-K funding is used in community-based programs. This cross sector collaboration increases access for families and leverages child care, Head Start, preschool special education, and even private tuition payments to create a mix of part-day, full-day and extended day options for children. This cross sector collaboration is essential to support the full continuum of high-quality early care and education.

**Additional Recommendations**
The Campaign also asks the State to:

**Close the State Budget Loophole that has cut 15% of Pre-K funds**
Since 2008, New York State’s investment in Pre-K has been cut by $67 million, or 15%, due to a loophole which allows the Division of Budget to divert Pre-K funds that school districts do not use into the State’s general fund. Instead, any such funds should be reallocated for other school districts to use for implementing Pre-K. Such funds become available due to factors outside a school district’s control—such as unexpected changes in enrollment.
Protect Full-Day Kindergarten

The K-12 system should be adequately funded to protect full-day Kindergarten, which is now at risk in many districts. In the 2011-12 school year, 199,216 five-year-olds were enrolled in Kindergarten, with all but 11,568 attending full-day programs. Prior to last year, the trend across the State has been to decrease half-day options and increase full-day seats. With the new State aid cap, as well as a cap on property tax revenues, full-day Kindergarten is now in jeopardy.

Take Pre-K out of the current cap on school aid to ensure school districts can continue to expand access to move toward reaching the State’s established goal of access for all. Limits on Pre-K funding have stalled enrollment at about 102,367 children for the 2011-2012 school year – only about halfway to being available to all four-year-olds. The inclusion of Pre-K in the State aid cap last year created a new barrier to expansion by placing funding for Pre-K in direct competition with K and K-12. Pre-K aid had previously been kept separate from K-12 aid to enable districts to keep building out the service.

Protect Pre-K standards and ensure best practice in every classroom. The Pre-K program was established with high standards for classroom practice and teacher qualifications. The recently approved Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core sets appropriate expectations for children that are aligned with the program goals for QUALITYstarsNY. Appropriate professional preparation and on-going professional development for both teachers and administrators are essential to meeting these program goals and supporting child outcomes. Adequate resources must be provided to help reach the goal of B-2 certified teachers in all Pre-K classrooms and equitable compensation to these teachers in both school and non-school settings. The State needs to focus more attention on developing teachers who can support English Language Learners. To date, teacher preparation and professional development focus on monolingual training, curricula instruction and programming, leaving too many children behind.