At this moment in history, New York State can make a profound difference for children, for families, for the future.

Our Governor and key policymakers have called for significant education reform. With their leadership, we can provide every child with early care and education that is the best in the nation. A pioneer in the past, New York has fallen behind, failing to make necessary investments and to take best advantage of current resources. The Board of Regents, early childhood experts and business leaders all agree: to assure that every child enters kindergarten ready to succeed in school, New York State must now improve the quality of early childhood education.

Why do we need quality?

• to help children succeed in school and throughout life.
• so our state can better compete in the global economy.
• because business leaders need a qualified workforce.
• to realize proven returns on investments and save taxpayers money.
• because voters need and want the best for their children.
New York needs leadership to provide the vision and structure for quality improvement and expansion.

Assuring positive outcomes for children will require workforce development, improved standards and accountability, and statewide coordination. This paper is for those seeking to build on public and private investments and ensure that strategies are aligned for quality.
Four essential elements of quality:

• **Qualified Teachers**
  As the most essential component of quality, teachers must be knowledgeable and skilled, and they must remain in the field.

• **Standards and Best Practice**
  Early childhood experts and the Regents agree that standards for all settings must be improved to reflect current research and practice.

• **Leadership at the Highest Levels**
  There must be commitment from the top in order to create a vision and to efficiently structure, coordinate and fund our diverse system.

• **Resources**
  Funding and support are critical to insure that quality is well implemented and maintained.
Children achieve when they have qualified teachers. Research has shown that quality is not possible without them. Teaching staff must be stable, dependable, consistent, and committed; and teachers must be well educated, knowledgeable and well prepared. Because New York cannot reap the returns we seek without qualified teachers, we must now invest in our early education workforce.

Community based early education programs enroll the vast majority of New York’s young children, including the majority of those in prekindergarten. New York lags behind other states in professional workforce development; and this is sometimes reflected in uneven quality. The current system neither supports nor rewards teachers seeking the higher education and professional development they need to teach appropriately and to become certified. Compensation levels do not support a college education, and fail to adequately reward teachers who graduate. When they do become certified, teachers often seek better compensation elsewhere, resulting in turnover rates approaching 30 percent per year. Turnover among directors and other educational leaders is equally high. The inability to recruit and keep early childhood educators has been a problem for years and today, the number of qualified teachers is declining.

It is time to take two bold steps to bring quality teaching to every early childhood program.

The state must help teachers improve their education and training through a system of educational supports and incentives. The Early Childhood Workforce Development Program, developed by Winning Beginning NY, would create a partnership between the state, early education programs and educational staff to help teachers move forward. It would provide them with release time to pursue credentials and degrees, reimbursement for related expenses (tuition and books), college loan forgiveness, and professional mentoring.

The state must adequately compensate early childhood teachers and directors to keep them on the job and in the field. The Workforce Development Program recommends retention bonuses based on the level of educational attainment, and a teacher education compensation fund to address the disparity in compensation for certified teachers in public school and those in community based early education programs.
Standards and Best Practice

Standards are essential to the quality of any educational effort and early childhood is no exception. The Board of Regents has called for a reevaluation of New York’s prekindergarten standards to better align them with the latest research and practice. Also, there is a critical need to improve standards governing the state’s many other early care and education programs (child care, family child care, etc.). To assure better outcomes for children, these too must be aligned with the latest research, and they must be more clearly aligned with public school standards.

New York needs to bring together education, regulatory and early childhood experts in a broad-based and inclusive process to review and revise standards for early care and education programs, to create standards that reflect up-to-date research and practice, and that are more consistent.

Best Practice translates standards into reality. Teaching young children is a complex process with specific age-appropriate teaching methods. Curriculum, approaches to learning, assessment, the importance of relationships, and collaboration with parents are among the key ingredients. They are part of a distinct pedagogy. As in the K-to-12 system, the state’s early care and education sector must reflect best practice, which then must be disseminated through professional development and mentoring. Researchers and educators have developed a rich body of knowledge about best practice; it is what schools of education teach. Unfortunately, parents, policymakers, and unprepared providers are not always well versed. They need a way to evaluate and implement quality.

New York State needs to implement a formal system of quality assurance with two components – a quality rating system, and program support for quality improvement.

Quality Rating System. Thirty-nine states have implemented or are developing quality rating systems (QRS). These rank programs according to research-based indicators. Programs perform self-assessments, and at higher rating levels, are assessed by outside experts. National accreditation is at or near the top tier on the scale. The publicized ratings help parents make informed choices. In some states, higher QRS scores are linked to higher reimbursement rates. QRS work has begun in New York, but a state commitment is essential to improve quality and ensure positive outcomes.

Quality Improvement Support. To make sure standards and best practice are implemented, New York needs to help programs move up through the QRS steps and reach top tier quality. Support like this has been provided through accreditation facilitation projects. Funded through public and private dollars, these projects provide expert technical assistance, mentoring, assessment strategies and improvement plans to help schools, child care and Head Start centers, preschools and others become accredited. New York can build on this foundation to develop a broader model, one that would help programs effectively implement new early education standards and succeed under a Quality Rating System.
Leadership at the Highest Levels

To achieve these goals and realize the benefits of early education, New York needs leadership at all levels, but especially at the highest level. That leadership will galvanize public support for new investments and for more effective use of current resources to achieve higher quality early education in all settings – child care, prekindergarten, Head Start, nursery schools, infant-toddler programs, special education, early intervention and home visiting. Presently, varying standards, income streams and agencies lead to inconsistent eligibility, and complicated contract and funding guidelines. Only strong leadership can provide the vision to address the duplicative and conflicting requirements that lead to confusion, and to wasted time and resources in the state, locally and in programs.

The Governor needs to empanel an Early Learning Commission charged with developing a clear plan of action to improve consistency, coordination and investment. The commission needs to develop targets for key structural and regulatory reforms, and associated funding. Commission members should include state agencies (including the State Education Department); legislative staff; early education experts and advocates; representatives of business, labor and higher education; the school and provider community; and others. To succeed the commission must lay out clear objectives for action and accountability mechanisms to track and report progress.
An early education pioneer in the past, today New York State has fallen behind. It ranks twentieth in the nation on ten key measures of children’s well-being. We have yet to fulfill our promise of prekindergarten for all; the number of children in quality child care has stalled; and services for infants and their families fall far short of the need.

New York can look to a number of sources for answers on how best to finance early care and education. The Campaign for Fiscal Equity decision coupled with the Governor’s public commitment offer potential new resources for early childhood education, now universally recognized as part of a sound basic education. Ongoing work by foundations and by finance experts, and precedents in other states all address innovative financing and systems strategies. And now, a recent Zogby poll indicates that taxpayers are willing to make the investment.

We can improve early education standards. But without the resources to keep teachers and make education available to them; without fulfilling prior commitments; and without quality assurance and field support to implement it, higher standards will remain academic. Children, families and our state will fail to reap the personal and economic benefits of quality early education.

New York must make new investments to improve quality and expand access. The Governor needs to increase investments for child care and prekindergarten, paying particular attention to full day care. The state can implement some meaningful improvements at little cost, but others, such as workforce development, will require new funding.
New York needs to:

- Attract and keep well qualified teachers,
- Improve standards, and help programs implement best practice,
- Provide visionary leadership at the highest level,
- Commit new resources to accomplish these goals.

Through leadership at the highest levels, we can improve quality, coordination and investment across our broad system.

The value of early education is proven; the Board of Regents is committed to improving standards; and, early learning is a key component of a sound basic education. Together, New York’s Governor and Legislature can provide leadership and take action to make our state’s early care and education the best in the nation.

Written by Todd Boressoff for Winning Beginning NY

The Winning Beginning NY coalition, co-convened by Child Care Inc., NYS Association for the Education of Young Children, NYS Child Care Coordinating Council, and the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, supports children birth to five and their families.

The campaign receives support from the Pew Charitable Trusts’ initiative, PreK Now, to advance high quality prekindergarten for the nation’s 3- and 4-year olds through objective, policy-focused research in conjunction with state public education and national outreach.

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