Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to share my perspectives with you about the importance of high quality early education as it relates to overall Education Reform.

A wide body of research has shown time and again that a child’s experiences in the first five years of life are crucial to their healthy physical, emotional, and cognitive development. In fact, 85 percent of a person’s brain connections are hard-wired before they start school. Knowing this, it becomes easy to understand why some children arrive to Kindergarten with a solid foundation to begin learning, and why there are others who start school developmentally behind their peers. It’s the difference between children whose experiences in the early years have spurred their development, and those whose experiences have stifled it.

You might say, “Oh, well these students will receive services once they are in school, and then they will catch up.” No; that’s a nice idea, but one that statistics do not bear out. The fact is that for every 50 children who don’t learn to read in kindergarten, 44 of them will still have trouble in 3rd grade. Want to hear something even scarier? Children without reading skills by 3rd grade are unlikely to graduate. The bottom line is that the achievement gap we’re all here to address starts years before children begin public school. And it’s in these early years that the “achievement gap” can be most effectively eliminated.

To quote Governor Cuomo “It is essential that we give New York students the knowledge and the tools to compete and to thrive in this highly competitive global economy”. To do so, we must build on New York’s investment in public education by ensuring that children are ready for school before they ever set foot in the door. School readiness will boost third grade reading levels, decrease the need for special education and remediation, and increase high school graduation rates.

We know that investing in early childhood education will improve student achievement! Even economists have been telling us for years that investment in early childhood education yields higher social returns than similar investments in older children and adults. Yet, we continue to heap more money into school remediation services and adult job training, hoping for better outcomes. We’re just throwing good money after bad. We’re doing the same thing and expecting different results, which is how Einstein defined insanity. Too much is at stake for us to keep taking the insanity path.

So I’m going to join Nobel-prize winning economist James Heckman of the University of Chicago in proposing a different strategy for closing the educational achievement gap and developing a skilled workforce that will meet the needs of our global economy. INVEST IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT AT HIGHER PROPORTIONS THAN WE NOW DO. BY FOLLOWING THIS STRATEGY WE WILL REDUCE THE NEED FOR LARGE REMEDIATION INVESTMENTS FOR OLDER CHILDREN AND ADULTS.

And I should say that I’ve seen this strategy work first-hand. As a young mom I was unable to afford to give my four year old daughter the best overall early childhood experiences that would put her on the early path to success. But, thanks to public investment in early childhood, Head Start was there for us. Her Head Start experience, coupled with the strong family support serves resulted in Melinda starting Kindergarten on equal footing with her peers from more advantaged backgrounds. She was a successful
student and graduated in the top 1/3\textsuperscript{rd} of her class. Having earned her Bachelor’s, she is now working on a Master’s degree in Special Education. But Head Start is available to a precious few families in our communities ... those with the very least of everything. So, so many more children could benefit from greater investment in early childhood education.

“\textit{So, what to do?}” NYS needs to invest early to improve educational impacts and close the achievement gap and one such strategy would be full implementation of QUALITYstarsNY, including for all Pre-K programs, with targeting initial expansion to the districts serving the most at-risk children.

It’s common knowledge that New York lost out on the opportunity for Federal funding through the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant—we came in 23rd out of 37! The winners of the federal grant were states that had invested in their young children and currently have a quality rating and improvement system, such as New York State’s QUALITYstarsNY, in place. QUALITYstarsNY has been field tested and parents and early education programs are ready to embrace it. Also, the Department of Education is using QUALITYstarsNY to reach 300 programs in persistently low achieving school districts. While this is fantastic, at this rate it will take until the end of the century to reach every child. Full implementation of QSNY will set a higher standard for ece programs and will assist the programs in meeting those standards. By raising standards and holding ece programs accountable. QSNY is designed to drive investment toward better outcomes for children. QSNY will also drive policy and investment by supporting:

- Quality teachers
- Effective teaching
- Quality learning environments
- Parent engagement, and
- Public accountability

Again, going back to the Governor’s press release regarding the forming of this commission; some of his key issues for address include:

- Improve teacher performance
- Improve student achievement
- Increase parent and family engagement in education
- Examine the problem of high need and low wealth school communities.
- Examine NY education system to ensure it meets the needs of student while respecting the tax payer.

It appears as though QSNY and the Governor’s goals could align quite well.
So what exactly would this investment in early childhood look like? Here is what we propose:

- **Avoid cuts to Kindergarten by fully funding K – 12 education**
- **Fully implement QUALITYstarsNY**
  - By raising standards and holding early childhood educators accountable, QUALITYstarsNY is designed to drive investment toward better outcomes for children, preparing them for college and career.
  - The QUALITYstarsNY implementation cost of $100 M per year covers:
    - Cost to administer the program of $300 per child annually.
    - $16.4 million in direct supports to programs and providers for quality improvement including professional development, technical assistance and financial rewards and incentives. (Fully implemented this would increase to 89% of the overall investment)
    - $3.6 investment in program assessment and rating, communication and outreach, data collection and system evaluation.
- Full implementation and appropriate funding levels for the **Universal Pre-K** program so that all four year olds in New York State have access to UPK.
  - Enough funding to cover all students in districts already operating UPK
  - Reopening funding to districts who were blocked when the program was frozen in 2009
  - Expanding to full day, with adequate funding to cover the cost to operate full day
  - Funding separate from K – 12 funding so that changing in the level of one funding does not affect the funding level for the other.
  - Protect and improve Pre-K standards.

Governor Cuomo vowed in his state-of-the-state speech that he would be the new lobbyist for students. As he continues to wage his campaign to put students first we, in the field of early care, ask the commission to compel the Governor to include New York’s youngest children in their crucial first five years of living and learning in his campaign.

Respectfully submitted,

Carla Hibbard