I appreciate having the opportunity to share my perspectives with you today on the critical role high quality early learning programs can play in supporting student achievement. My name is Peggy Liuzzi, and I am the Executive Director of Child Care Solutions, the Child Care Resource & Referral agency that serves Onondaga and Cayuga Counties here in Central New York.

Child Care Solutions was founded in 1975 to promote early learning, healthy development and high quality care for all children. We do this by providing referrals, education, advocacy and support for parents and early childhood professionals and by working with community partners and policymakers to improve access to high-quality early learning experiences for children.

I am here today to talk about why early education, birth to age 5, should be an essential and integral component of New York’s education system and how targeted investments in effective, evidence-based early education initiatives can help us achieve the long-term outcomes we want for our children and our communities. Specifically, I want to recommend investment in two programs, Quality Stars NY and PreK, as a way to provide access to high-quality early learning experiences that can reduce the achievement gap for at-risk children and provide a foundation for school success for all children.

The Early Years are Important:

Decades of scientific research and findings point to the same conclusion: healthy development and learning in the early years provide the building blocks for educational achievement, economic productivity, good citizenship and the ability to successfully parent the next generation.

Children begin learning from birth when their earliest experiences and interactions with caregivers begin to build the neural connections that make up the architecture of the brain. Research data suggests that 75% of brain growth and 85% of intellect, personality and social skills develop in the first 5 years of a child’s life.

Achievement Gaps Begin Early:

- By the time they are 2-years old, low-income toddlers are behind their more affluent peers in receptive and expressive vocabulary and counting skills.
- The quantity and quality of verbal interactions in the early years matters. A child’s vocabulary as early as age 3 can predict 3rd grade reading achievement.
- Studies have shown that at least half the educational achievement gaps between low-income and higher-income children already exist at kindergarten entry.
High Quality Early Childhood Programs Work:

The quality, duration and intensity of early childhood education interventions matter. High-quality early education programs boost cognitive skills and help children develop the social competence they need to enter school better prepared for success. The cost of providing high-quality early intervention is offset by the long-term positive outcomes for children and the communities in which they live. Positive effects include decreased grade retention, decreased need for special education, higher reading and math achievement scores, higher levels of formal education, and delayed parenthood. Though all children benefit, the children at the highest risk benefit the most from early education interventions.

The national Campaign for Grade Level Reading is a coalition of funders, non-profit partners, communities and states dedicated to increasing the number of children from low-income families who will read proficiently by the end of third grade. The interventions that the Campaign identifies as critical to achieving that goal are school attendance, summer learning and early learning.

Cost-benefit analyses may disagree on the dollar amount of the return on investment in early education, but there is consensus on the long-term economic benefits. Just this month, Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke stated that educating children starting at an early age increases their opportunities and benefits the larger economy.

Improving Educational Outcomes in New York State:

New York State has already identified two early education strategies that have been shown to have strong, positive outcomes on children’s school readiness. They are Quality Stars NY and the PreK program. Despite strong evidence about the positive impact of high-quality early learning programs on school readiness and later school success, both programs are awaiting full implementation in New York State.

The issues surrounding school readiness, the grade-level reading achievement gap, high school graduation rates and the ability of our schools to prepare students with the skills needed for today’s workforce are complex and daunting. But we are in crisis, here in Central New York and around the State. In the Syracuse City School District, 74% of 3rd graders are not reading at grade level. Experts estimate that close to 3/4 of those children will not graduate with their class. Carefully considered, strategic action is needed at the State level to identify resources and strategies that will have the biggest impact on these issues. One of the most promising strategies we could implement is to strengthen and expand children’s participation in high-quality early childhood programs.

Quality Stars NY:

Quality Stars NY is a voluntary Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) designed to assess and improve the quality of New York’s early care and learning programs. It was designed based on the experience of 23 other states that have implemented QRIS initiatives. Quality Stars NY is an inclusive system providing a common set of quality standards for NY’s regulated child care, Head Start and PreK programs. Quality Stars NY has powerful potential because it includes child care programs that serve children as young as 6 weeks of age and the first 3 years of a child’s life are so critical to later learning.

Quality Stars NY includes quality standards that relate to family engagement as well as learning environment and best practices to support early development and learning. Participating programs will receive grants, professional development and consultation to improve their quality. The system is highly accountable, and the star ratings will be easy for parents to understand. Another benefit of Quality
Stars NY is that it will collect information on staff qualifications and program quality that will allow New York State to precisely target how funds can be best used to improve quality.

After a successful field test in 13 communities in 2010 and a redesign of the delivery system and standards based on what was learned in the field test, implementation of Quality Stars NY has just begun in 7 communities including Syracuse. Funding for initial implementation came from the State Education Department which committed $4 million in Race to the Top funds to start Quality Stars NY in districts with persistently low-performing schools. It’s time now to make a strategic plan for full implementation across the State.

PreK:

Universal PreKindergarten legislation was passed in 1997 with the promise of access to a school district early education program for every 4-year old in New York State. Public school collaboration with existing early childhood programs in many communities, including Syracuse, increased access for working parents and continuity for children and was a cost-effective way to use existing resources and capacity. The partnerships between school districts and community-based early childhood programs had a very positive impact on both quality and reach of the PreK program in New York State.

Now 15 years later, the promise remains unmet. Fewer than half the districts in our area offer the PreK program. Diminishing funds caused waiting lists in some districts. Other districts closed their PreK programs. Part-day programs have proved difficult for families to use because of parent work schedules, responsibilities for younger siblings and lack of transportation. Research, including a paper by local ESM Superintendent Donna Desiato, has shown that full-day PreK programs have a more significant impact than part-day programs on children’s skill development.

Recommendations to the Commission:

Overall:

- Remember that young children are embedded in families. Design early education initiatives that recognize the role of families in ensuring children’s participation, attendance and learning outcomes.

- Build the foundations of an early learning system that encourages continuity for young children and extended learning opportunities over time. Our current patchwork system results in many young children being enrolled in more than one program in order to access full-day early learning experiences. Child care funding is dependent on parent eligibility, not children’s needs, causing churning in community programs as children come and go. Children have to deal with multiple teachers and caregivers as do their families. Young children benefit from strong, ongoing relationships with caring adults - the educational infrastructure we build should reinforce that value.

- Learn more about kindergarten readiness. Institute a state-wide kindergarten assessment so that we have more data to target interventions and measure our progress.

Quality Stars NY:

- Expand Quality Stars NY to more communities. Full implementation is estimated to cost $100 million per year. If resources require incremental implementation, target the initial expansion to those school districts that serve the most at-risk children.
• Create incentives to encourage school district PreK participation in Quality Stars NY.

**PreK:**

• Provide adequate funding to provide access to PreK for all New York State 4-year olds, including partnership models with community child care programs to support the participation of children of working families.

• Provide the funding to allow high-need districts to offer full school-day PreK programs.

• Allocate PreK funding separately from K – 12 school aid to minimize competition and protect the State’s investment in early education.

• Protect PreK standards including teacher qualifications.

Thank you.

Submitted by:
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