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**Advocates Urge Restoring Funding to Pre-K Programs**

Early childhood advocates were at the Capitol on Tuesday, calling on the state legislature to reprogram $53M back into the budget for pre-kindergarten programs.
Early education is at risk across New York.

School aid cuts have meant the slashing of pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs around the state, according to a report released Tuesday by a coalition of education advocacy groups.

The report shows New York's under-investment in early learning will mean more long-term spending on remedial education and an ever-widening achievement gap between white and black students.

The students who benefit the most from early learning are those more likely to fall behind their peers by high school, said Kate Breslin, president of the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, a nonprofit that advocates for needy New Yorkers. She said that includes Hispanic children, black children, English language learners and children from low-income families.

"If we want kids to graduate from high school and go on to careers or college, we cannot start thinking about that when they're in high school or even middle school," she said.

Very few local public school districts offer pre-kindergarten. The report shows that the number of students in the state with access to pre-kindergarten is shrinking. In the 2008-2009 school year, the state spent $451 million to send up to 121,120 students to pre-kindergarten. Gov. Andrew Cuomo's proposed budget will spend $384 million to send as many as 104,800 students to pre-kindergarten in the 2012-13 school year, which represents a 13 percent drop in the number of children benefiting from programs compared to 2008-09.

A child's first days in school are increasingly viewed as essential foundation that will determine the rest of his or her education. Districts have been converting full-day programs to half days in Poughkeepsie and Yonkers and reducing the number of students that can enroll, shutting out thousands of children from early learning opportunities across New York, in suburban, rural and urban school districts.

At last week's budget hearing on higher education, State University of New York chancellor Nancy Zimpher said the state spends $70 million on remedial education for its high school graduates. She said that early education is an essential place to reach struggling learners because that it where the achievement gap begins, not in high school. Zimpher said almost half of the students entering kindergarten were not prepared.

Cliff Bird, a Cohoes elementary school principal, said that of 451 students in his school, statistics based on poverty studies show 81 will drop out. Investing in early education is the best way to lower that, he said.

Investing in early education can save money in the long term, the report found, particularly for poor students. The report found that expanding public pre-school could save $9,500 per child in remedial services during the kindergarten through 12th grade years. The groups are pushing for an additional investment of $53 million to provide pre-school for another 14,000 children. The money could be shifted from the $250 million in competitive grant funding Cuomo proposed in his budget.
Groups Call On Cuomo To Restore Aid For Pre-K Programs

Advocacy groups today called on the state’s Legislature to put $53 million in the state budget for pre-kindergarten programs around the state, Gannett Albany Bureau’s Aaron Scholder reports.

Education advocates made their case for the funding increases based on a report released Tuesday that detailed reductions in funding over the past four years.

The report, called “Early Childhood Education: Frozen Funding Leads to Cracks in the Foundation,” highlights the decrease of $67 million in funding for universal pre-kindergarten programs since 2009.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s 2012-2013 budget provides $384.2 million in funding for pre-k, down from $451.2 in the 2008-2009 budget.

The advocacy groups also called on the Legislature to pass $93 million included in the budget for child care. The $53 million re-purposing would come out of $250 million in competitive grants that Cuomo has included in the budget.

“We came together today because we all believe investing in early childhood education, including pre-k, is one of the most cost-effective investments a state can make to improve school success and close the achievement gap,” said Kate Breslin, the president of the Schuylar Center for Analysis and Advocacy.

Breslin pointed to the report’s claim that children who attend pre-k programs are more likely to attend college as a reason for the funding increase.

Increases in pre-k tuition have forced families to reconsider having their children attend, putting them behind their classmates when they enter kindergarten, advocates said.
“I can’t implore the legislators enough to make this funding a priority,” said Kelly Chiarella, the president of the Westchester–East Putnam Region Parent–Teacher Association.

The $384.2 million proposed by Cuomo is the same as last year, as well as the maximum number of students capable of being served by the money, 104,800. The number of school districts eligible to receive money went down from 444 to 441.

“There’s a lot of talk about competition in education right now,” said Billy Easton, the executive director of the Alliance for Quality Education. “But if we were to hold a competition for the most effective programming possible, early childhood education and pre-K would get to the finish line first.”

Here’s some of Easton’s pitch at the press conference.
Report Details Years of Pre-K Cuts

On Tuesday a coalition of early childhood education providers, parents, policy and advocacy groups released a new report that details drastic reductions to the Universal Pre-Kindergarten grant since 2007, despite proof that investment in early childhood education programs have significant economic and social benefits, and that funds are available to make this investment.

In 2007-08, up to 116,745 children were able to be served through the Universal Pre-Kindergarten grant, through a maximum of $437.9 million. In 2011-12, that maximum funding had been reduced to $364.2 million, allowing for a maximum of only 104,800 children to be served.

The report, Early Childhood Education: Frozen Funding Leads to Cracks in the Foundation, calls on the legislature to reprogram $93 million from the competitive grants proposed in the Executive Budget to Universal Pre-Kindergarten, allowing for up to 14,000 more children to have access to the program. The report also calls on the Legislature to adopt the $93 million included in the Executive Budget for child care funding, to ensure that children of low-income working parents are able to receive subsidies.

"Investing in quality early childhood education, including Pre-K, is one of the most cost effective investments a state can make to improve school success and close the achievement gap," said Kate Breslin, President and CEO, Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy. "Why? Reading by third grade is a predictor of future academic success. Students who attend Pre-K are more likely to have better reading skills by third grade than students who attend just kindergarten. And the positive impact of Pre-K is greatest for Hispanic children, black children, English language learners and children from low-income families. If New Yorkers care about school success, the early years are the best investment we can make."

Quality Pre-Kindergarten programs are proven to lead to success for our children. The report found that within ten years of investment in these programs, New York State would realize cost savings of 40-60% in the areas of special education, grade repetition, and higher learning productivity. Going to college and higher paying jobs, lower teen pregnancy, lower welfare dependence, and reductions in crime were all found to be more likely for children who have access to quality Pre-K programs.

"If we held a competition to determine the most effective education reform, Pre-Kindergarten would win by a mile," said Billy Easton, Executive Director of the Alliance for Quality Education. "Increased investments in early education ensure that more of New York State's youngest children will enter school ready for learning and ready for life, meeting New York State's goal of making this a right for every child," said Nancy Kolben, Executive Director of the Center for Children's Initiatives.

"With so much evidence showing the economic and societal benefits of providing quality Pre-K, how can we continue to deprive so many kids of their chance at success?" said Karen Scharff, Executive Director of Citizen Action of New York.
Pre-kindergarten crucial to youth

As a sheriff, I am disappointed and worried to hear that the new gains we have made over the past decade in supporting early education are now in danger of sliding backward ("Report: Young learners at risk," Feb. 8). School success is central to life success.

While I spend my days focused on law enforcement, one thing I have learned very clearly is that if we want safer communities in the future, we need to invest in proven programs today, like pre-kindergarten that provides kids with a strong start to their education.

Two weeks ago, before testifying in support of high-quality preschool at the state Legislature's budget hearing on education, I checked the records in my jail and found that about 68 percent of those incarcerated did not have a high school diploma. I have since learned that, nationwide, almost 70 percent of state prison inmates lack a high school diploma.

We have made great progress on providing educational opportunities for New York's preschoolers in the past 10 years. Allowing these opportunities to slip away would be a loss for the kids who may start school behind and a long-term threat to the safety of our communities.

I know that we are still in very difficult budget times, but I urge all of our state legislators to come together and find the necessary funding to support pre-kindergarten services across New York and make sure our kids get the right start they need for success.

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