EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Making Prekindergarten Truly Universal in New York

A STATEWIDE ROADMAP
The research is conclusive: Providing a high-quality early childhood education is crucial if we are to reach our state and national goals of educational equity and excellence, preparing children for college and career. The federal government, states throughout the country, and the courts are increasingly recognizing this reality. This report provides a detailed roadmap for making high-quality, full-day pre-K available for all three and four year olds in New York State over an eight-year period.

The Campaign for Educational Equity and the Center for Children’s Initiatives drafted this roadmap in consultation with more than 100 public education and early childhood experts, advocates, teachers, and administrators across the state. It draws as well on lessons learned in other states and recommendations from leading national researchers in the field. Our report offers a new financing strategy that recognizes prekindergarten as an essential educational service.

In 1997, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver proposed and the New York State legislature adopted Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) legislation, a bold new approach to early childhood education. This plan builds on the significant investment, experience and expertise gained in state’s UPK program, which now serves more than 100,000 children. It also expands on Governor Cuomo’s new competitive grant program, which adds high-quality full-day pre-K services for several thousand more children. Our plan offers a roadmap for the urgently-needed next steps. Too many New York children still do not receive the benefits of pre-K. Nearly 40% of the state’s school districts are not even eligible to apply for state pre-K funding. At least 30,000 high-need four year olds are not served. And 75% of our pre-K students are in half-day programs, which research shows to be insufficient to meet the needs of children and their families.

Governor Cuomo’s New NY Education Reform Commission has already called for a “seamless pipeline” of educational services starting at birth, with full-day prekindergarten as the next strategic step in New York State. The commission recognized the potential for prekindergarten to narrow the achievement gap, with long-term benefits for children, schools, taxpayers, and communities, noting the “benefits outweigh its costs.” The governor’s commission should now recommend and the state should recognize both the need and the right of every child to early education and adopt a definitive implementation plan, based on this roadmap, for making pre-K truly universal in New York State.
For truly universal prekindergarten, New York must increase and regularize state aid for pre-K services. To accomplish this, the increased investment must be incorporated into the general state education finance system that now covers K-12 education. The new strategy will assure that pre-K funding is equitable, adequate, stable, and transparent. It assumes the continuation of the requirement that services be offered in both public schools and early childhood programs in the community, with the goal of leveraging existing public investments, capacity, and resources in early education and creating a full range of options to meet family needs. The eight-year roadmap is based on four key recommendations and includes the quality elements.
FOUR KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

TARGET GROUP
All three and four year olds in New York State must be guaranteed access to high-quality full-day prekindergarten programs in public schools and early childhood programs in the community. All five year olds must be guaranteed access to full-day kindergarten programs.

PHASE-IN SCHEDULE
The reform is designed to be phased in over an eight-year period. Guaranteed access for children to high-quality pre-K programs must be provided according to the following schedule:

Years 1-3: All four year olds in districts with high concentrations of low-income households.

Years 4-5: All four year olds in all districts.

Years 6-7: All three year olds in districts with high concentrations of low-income households.

Year 8: All three year olds in all districts.

Note: Until a district enters the phase-in process, it will continue to receive its current level of state support for pre-K.

FINANCING FRAMEWORK
State aid for prekindergarten programs should be incorporated into the K-12 state education finance system, once that system has been brought up to a constitutionally adequate funding level.

Initially, the state should pay the full cost of the pre-K program, but with the long-term goal of appropriate cost-sharing between the local district and the state, with total costs divided between state and local school districts in accordance with each district’s relative wealth.

FUNDING LEVELS
Funding should encompass all necessary costs for high-quality programs, including social services, health, family engagement services, as well as support services for students with disabilities enrolled in inclusion programs. Funding levels and strategies must also encompass the costs of the systems supports and infrastructure necessary to build out high-quality programs.
Researchers have identified the essential elements of early childhood programs associated with better educational outcomes for children. This roadmap includes a strong regulatory framework, with pre-K requirements that incorporate these elements, to establish appropriate funding levels for programs with the goal of promoting cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development in all settings. Programs must include strategies to fully engage families in all aspects of their children’s learning.

These regulations also align with the state’s efforts to implement a quality rating and improvement system for early childhood programs and complement current efforts to build a systemic, statewide approach to early education.

Specifically, the state must ensure that each school district has sufficient funding to offer full school day services for 180 days per year. In addition, each district should adopt strategies to effectively meet the needs of working families by leveraging other funding sources to offer extended hours and days of services. In addition, all programs must adhere to the following requirements:

- **Appropriate Class Sizes**
- **Well-Qualified, Highly Effective Teachers**
- **Well-Qualified Supervisors and Administrators**
- **Appropriate, Evidence-Based Curricula**
- **Comprehensive Services and Supports**
- **Appropriate Services for Students with Disabilities**
- **Support for English Language Learners**
- **Quality, Accessible Learning Environments**
Early childhood is still a relative newcomer to public education and, as such, lacks the essential system supports and infrastructure available to other grades funded in the traditional K-12 system. New York does not have a funding strategy for pre-K that covers critical elements such as workforce development, transportation aid, and facilities. Our roadmap includes these and the other infrastructure elements that have been identified by policymakers, practitioners, and researchers as vital to ensuring effective use of resources and promoting positive outcomes for children. Specifically, the state must ensure:

- **The Recruitment and Retention of Highly Effective Teachers**
- **Facilities Expansion Planning**
- **Transportation Aid**
- **Data Infrastructure**
- **Effective Community Partnerships**
- **Quality Assurance**
- **Ongoing Program Evaluation**

New York State is poised to be a national leader in implementing a truly universal pre-K system for all of our state’s three and four year olds, the longstanding vision of Regents and the legislature. Making this vision a reality, however, will require a rights-based approach that integrates prekindergarten into the state’s education finance system and provides sufficient investment in the infrastructure needed to ensure a high-quality programs in all pre-K settings.
This report was written by Michael A. Rebell and Jessica R. Wolff, Campaign for Educational Equity, and Nancy Kolben and Betty Holcomb, Center for Children’s Initiatives. Additional research assistance was provided by Nikki Nielsen, Samuel Milder, and Gilana Keller.

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For a copy of the full report, Making Prekindergarten Truly Universal in New York: A Statewide Roadmap, visit: www.equitycampaign.org or www.ccinyc.org. Or contact wolff@tc.edu or bholcomb@ccinyc.org.

A separate cost analysis of this plan is available upon request.