

**Submission to the New York State Division of the Budget
Public Hearings regarding the 2008-2009 Budget
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Thank you for holding these public hearings and for allowing me to speak to you today about a budget issue that I care deeply about—funding for universal pre-kindergarten (Pre-K).

Why is Pre-K important? In the short-term, it helps prepare children for school and for life by building their cognitive, developmental, and social-emotional skills. In addition, research shows that society benefits from the long-term effects of Pre-K through increased income tax revenues, lower welfare dependence, and a reduction in delinquency and crime.¹

I am here as a member of *Generations United*, the country's only membership organization that promotes intergenerational public policies, programs, and strategies whose membership represents over 70 million Americans. I have joined with other age 50-plus adults for Generation United's Seniors for Kids campaign, a statewide initiative that raises the visibility of older adults campaigning to support high-quality early care and education. A common misconception is that older Americans are only concerned about property taxes, pensions, and prescription drugs. The reality is far different. Older adults have the strong desire to give back to their communities and understand that children are the message they send to a future they will not see. Generations United is a partner organization of *Winning Beginning NY*. *Winning Beginning NY* is a statewide early care and education coalition based in Albany that advocates for Pre-K and child care programs.

Seniors4Kids was pleased to see the state's inclusion of \$146 million in last year's budget to expand Pre-K. We hope to see an increase toward full and adequate funding for high quality Pre-K this year. However, we would like to see any new funding incorporate more flexibility for implementation. School districts need to be able to fund services and supports as well as "slots".

Providing high-quality Pre-K is an issue that affects all New York citizens. With traditional family structure changing, and many older New Yorkers caring for their grandchildren, they are directly impacted by the quality of Pre-K that New York state provides. In New York, 121,670 grandparents were living with grandchildren under age 18 in 2006 according to the 2006 American Community Survey from the U.S. Census Bureau.

First of all, working parents and caregivers require full-day options. A 2 ½ hour program leaves parents searching for alternative programs for the remainder of the day. In

addition, research shows that, from an educational and developmental standpoint, part-day programs are good but full-day programs are better. And, again, an entire community benefits from a child's increased schooling.

Second, families need programs that are accessible. Those that are able to provide transportation allow working parents and caregivers to do just that—work, without the added stress of arranging transportation to and from programs.

Third, Pre-K programs need wrap-around supports. Sixty percent of all Pre-K programs are located in child care centers, and *Winning Beginning NY* has encouraged districts to collaborate on new programs with these existing community-based organizations. However, even a full-day program is only five hours, at least three hours short of a normal work day. You may think that Pre-K and child care are separate entities, but they are not. Families need child care services both before and after Pre-K classes, to fill the gap before the workday is done.

Finally, quantity without quality is a no-win situation for New York State's children. This leads us to the cornerstone of high-quality care—qualified early care and education professionals. The majority of child care workers earn less than retail sales clerks. Pre-K teachers who teach in child care settings earn significantly less than their public school counterparts. Think about this—since they allow us to earn a living by teaching and caring for our children while we work, shouldn't they earn a decent living themselves?

Turnover of Pre-K teachers in child care settings is rampant because of salary inequities. Communities often lose these teachers to the public school system. Unfortunately, this pattern takes its toll on the children in those settings, who need consistency in order to feel comfortable and safe. *Winning Beginning NY* is committed to fair compensation for these staff. The coalition also supports loan forgiveness for those staff who wish to return to school to earn a degree in early childhood education or a related field. New state requirements will soon make these degrees mandatory—shouldn't we help existing staff to meet these goals?

I believe that the state's 2007-08 investment in Pre-K is a downpayment on a comprehensive system of early care and education and hope that New York's commitment to high-quality programs for our youngest learners will continue in 2008-09.

As an older adult, I know that seniors want to leave a legacy for the next generation. What better legacy is there than top-notch education for children, the leaders of tomorrow? But, more importantly, research shows that children enrolled in pre-K achieve a brighter future. When they become adults, they are more likely to graduate high school, have higher earning potential, and evade criminal trouble. As a result, we strengthen the entire community and promote intergenerational cooperation.

¹ Belfield, Clive; *Early Childhood Education: How Important are the Cost-Savings to the School System?*; February 2004.