

**LONG ISLAND
REGIONAL TECHNICAL
ASSISTANCE CENTER**
FOR PRE-K & EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Pathways to Progress: Strengthening the Universal Pre-K Landscape on Long Island

Executive Summary and Recommendations

During the 2023-2024 school year, the LI-RTAC sponsored four roundtables designed to bring together stakeholders and practitioners in Early Childhood education to elicit their voice and thought leadership on the Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) landscape on Long Island. Participants included representation from school districts, community-based organizations and families. Our primary goals included exploring what is working to facilitate growth in UPK access on Long Island, and to identify challenges that still exist in achieving universal access to UPK for all of Long Island's four-year-olds.

The discussions yielded valuable insight from the various stakeholders from the Long Island early care and education systems. Over the last four years, Long Island has seen increased funding to create or expand UPK seat allocations to over 90 school districts with 60% of eligible four-year-olds enrolled in a half or full-day program. Increased technical, curriculum, and staff development support from New York State Office of Early Learning, New York State Office of Children and Family Services, alongside partner organizations including LI-RTAC, the three BOCES, the two Long Island Child Care Councils of Nassau & Suffolk, and the region's Early Childhood Professional Development institute hosted by CUNY, has all played a role in contributing to stronger UPK programs, as well as higher numbers of students attending them. Within the past ten years, the region has worked diligently to develop an initial blueprint and strategies for a regional coordinated system of care that brings together the resources and assets of each partner organization.

Data from the 2021-2022 and 2022-23 school year reports shows a gradual increase from 47% to 58% respectively in available seat allocations for four-year-olds on Long Island. Despite the increase in growth, Long Island is ranked in the bottom three out of ten regions in New York State for the percentage of those who receive UPK slots.¹ Observations and input as to why centered around the five themes that emerged from the roundtable discussions: **Funding, Special Education & Intervention Services, Staffing Capacity, Space, and Building and Sustaining, Strong Effective Partnerships.**

¹ New York State Office of Early Learning Enrollment Data - <https://www.nysed.gov/early-learning/prekindergarten-data>

Some of the key findings in our report include, but not limited to,

- **Significant Investment:** Address the need for significant investment in early care and education and provide the ability to blend and braid funding so that UPK programs can expand and thrive.
- **Consolidation of Funding:** Consolidate funding streams to provide maximum flexibility to support UPK expansion.
- **Expansion of Critical Services in Special Education & Inclusion:** Expand the number of 4410 programs offering UPK to ensure equitable access to special education to all communities on Long Island.
- **Innovative Workforce Development:** Develop innovative workforce strategies and pilot initiatives to support recruitment and retention of early care and UPK general education, special education, and early intervention providers.
- **Regional Coordination & Strategic Planning:** Support coordination efforts and strategic planning between CBOs and districts to determine appropriate space allocation and accommodations for UPK expansion.
- **Alignment Across All Early Childhood Systems:** Create alignment across early care and education systems in both CBO and school districts that honors a shared commitment to a whole-child approach from birth to grade three.

Recommendations

- **Expanding Funding Opportunities:** Increase funding sources for UPK. In addition to more funding from the state, identify other funding sources that include working with communities to build their understanding of the importance of Pre-K and subsequent community commitment to including funds for UPK as part of ongoing district budget planning. Consider strategies and tools that can help districts with increased UPK budget planning, as for example permitting a tax cap exclusion for new UPK funding. Explore ways to provide universal access to transportation for all UPK students.
- **Review Existing State Policies to Consolidate of Funding Streams:** Consolidate NYS funding streams so that districts have maximum flexibility in designing and implementing their own UPK programs, or those in collaboration with CBOs, to support serving the largest number of students in high-quality UPK programs.
- **Research & Invest in Special Education Access & Child Care Deserts** Research and identify the reasons the number of 4410 schools remain insufficient to support the needs of all UPK special needs students. Utilize this information to provide conditions that encourage school districts/CBOs to aspire to and achieve 4410 status. Utilize data to also expand on child care desert research on other modalities of early care impacting the field, including but not limited, the impact of gap of intervention services, particularly on the East End of Long Island
- **Design Pay Parity Strategy & Research Teacher Wellness Across Early Childhood System:** Design pay parity strategy for early care and Early Childhood educators on Long Island. Include benefit structure to support workforce needs,

as well as improve employment conditions for UPK staff working in partner CBOs to aid in staff recruitment and retention. In addition to identifying funds to enhance the competitiveness of salaries to those offered in district Early Childhood programs Pre-K to Grade 2, consider benefit structures, such as some types of pension opportunities that motivate longer-term staff commitment to CBO partners. Engage in research opportunities to explore teacher social-emotional learning, the impact of conditions and identifying how professional development and economic growth shifts wellness for educators to engage in the field,

- **Utilize Data from Demographic Studies to Meet Space Requirements & Innovative Requirements to Meet District Enrollment Needs:** Aid districts in utilizing data from demographic studies to determine space availability for expanded UPK programs that ultimately can support the attendance of all four-year-olds. Identify and make easily accessible tools that aid districts in meeting space requirements for expanded UPK such as building aid both for on-site programs and for expanded CBO physical plants.
- **Regionally Focused Collective Impact Structures, Strategies & Systems Alignment in Supporting Early Care:** Develop an Early Childhood collective impact strategy that will bring together school districts, CBOs, Early Childhood professional organizations, universities/colleges, and community representatives to support a coordinated approach to early care and education on Long Island. Include implement unified systems to support CBO and school district partnerships, such as professional development standards for practitioner growth and other key areas important to the field.
- **Build Regionally-Focused Education Toolkits & Advocacy Campaign on Universal Approach to Early Care & Education:** Create an advocacy campaign and training tool kit to increase awareness of the needs of the Long Island community regarding a universal approach to early care and education, including but not limited to, parents growing in their leadership capacity from involved in education to ambassadors and partners in education design and advocating for needs. implement unified systems to support CBO and school district partnerships.

The roundtables and follow-up interactions highlight a vibrant and caring community of UPK educators on Long Island. These educators deeply value the support and commitment of the New York State Education Department and New York State legislators, which has significantly contributed to expanded access to UPK for four-year-olds in the region. While the number of four-year-olds served on Long Island remains lower than in other parts of the state, educators are encouraged by the progress made and excited to continue the work. They welcome the opportunity to collaborate with community and government partners to take meaningful steps toward the ultimate goal--ensuring that every four-year-old on Long Island has access to high-quality UPK regardless of zip code or neighborhood.