



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

**Long Island Regional Technical Assistance Center
for Pre-K and Early Childhood Education**
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Pathways to Progress

Strengthening the Universal Pre-K Landscape on Long Island

**Key Trends & Recommendations from
Regionwide Stakeholder Roundtables**

Winter 2025

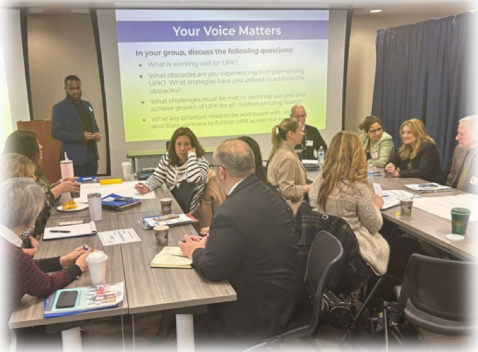


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Foreword

On behalf of the Long Island Regional Technical Assistance Center for Pre-K and Early Childhood Education (LI-RTAC), we are honored to present, “Pathways to Progress: Strengthening the Universal Pre-K Landscape on Long Island.” We hope this report will serve as a catalyst in supporting conversations, collaborations, and changes in policy and culture impacting our region’s early learners. The information captured is a window into key trends and recommendations for strengthening and growing Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) on Long Island.



This report is the culmination of the thoughtful conversations, insights and ideas so generously shared by our partners in education regarding issues directly impacting the success of UPK across our region. 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 input. Participants included representation from school districts, community-based organizations and families. The LI-RTAC is immensely grateful for the broad participation and committed input provided during the roundtables.

We want to thank the LI-RTAC Advisory Board partners for their leadership and wisdom throughout this process. We also want to acknowledge key stakeholders who reviewed this report and shared critical feedback prior to publication (in alphabetical order):

- **Dawn Daniello**, Retired Early Childhood Leader, Child Care Council of Nassau
- **Dr. Harold Dean**, President – Suffolk County School Superintendents Association & Superintendent – Little Flower Union Free School District
- **Dr. Cristina Medellin-Paz**, Early Childhood Regional Coordinator – Long Island, New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute at CUNY
- **Sara Morrison**, Parent Advocate & Co-Chair, Choice for All Parent Action Coalition of Long Island & National Parent Representative, United Parents Leaders Action Network
- **Dr. Dominick Palma**, Past President – Nassau County Council of School Superintendents & Superintendent – Merrick Union Free School District
- **Alissa Repetti**, Director of Early Childhood Services, Child Care Council of Nassau
- **Jacqueline Zaita**, Director of Professional Development, Child Care Council of Suffolk

Last, but certainly not least, I want to extend my deepest gratitude to Dr. Elaine Kanas and Dr. Florence Prophete-Barbour, our lead educational consultants on this important effort. Your drive and diligence turned this vision into a reality. Thank you, as well, to Dr. Adrienne Robb-Fund and Sheryl Haimovich for your fortitude and heart on this important milestone. Once again, thank you for taking the time to read “Pathways to Progress”. We look forward to continue working with you toward our deeply held vision of one day, every child on Long Island will have access to high-quality UPK or Early Childhood programs, regardless of ZIP code.

Jacob Dixon, MSED
Founder & CEO, Choice for All
Center Director, Long Island RTAC for Pre-K & Early Childhood Education

Our Mission & Vision

The Long Island Regional Technical Assistance Center (LI-RTAC) for Pre-K & Early Childhood Education is dedicated to improving quality, access, equity, and delivery of Pre-K and Early Childhood programs across Long Island. Our vision is that one day, all children will have access to a robust Pre-K and Early Childhood program on Long Island, regardless of zip code.

LI-RTAC is a collaborative center – a uniquely designed model where our primary activities, strategies, and goals are co-designed and facilitated by the center’s advisory board. In turn, our advisory board members, centers, consultants, and experts across disciplines from the country, work directly with schools, child care providers and community-based organizations to support an equitable, accessible, and robust quality Early Childhood education system on Long Island.

The advisory board includes Choice for All, Nassau BOCES, Western Suffolk BOCES, Eastern Suffolk BOCES, Child Care Council of Nassau, Child Care Council of Suffolk, and the New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute at CUNY. Choice for All is the center’s lead agency and administrator working in partnership with Nassau BOCES, which serves as the center’s fiscal agent.

LI-RTAC is the first technical assistance center funded by the State exclusively with a Pre-K focus. The center is funded through a special legislative grant through the New York State Education Department (NYSED) and New York State Office of Children and Family Services (NYS OCFS). The vision development, preliminary infrastructure, and program foundational components were made possible by our legacy funding partners, The Hagedorn Foundation and Rauch Foundation.

Our Approach



The LI-RTAC has a four-pronged approach to strengthen the Pre-K and Early Childhood system on Long Island: **Professional Development & Technical Assistance; Career Development & Leadership Services; Data, Research & Resource Development** and **Community Engagement: Families & Systems Leaders**.

Our team of consultants leads and facilitates key goals and activities under each approach to ensure that we are continuing our work intentionally toward actualizing our vision where every child on Long Island will have access to a robust Pre-K and Early Childhood program.

Professional Development & Technical Assistance – LI-RTAC provides quality, culturally responsive professional development for teachers, program administrators, leaders, and families. Topics include meeting the needs of all Early Childhood learners, best practices, SEL, NYS Early Learning Guidelines, developmentally appropriate practices (DAP), classroom culture, and addressing challenging behaviors, multilingual learners, family engagement, early childhood leadership administration, and more. For close to a decade, the LI-RTAC hosts the Expanding Opportunities for Early Learners in Pre-K and K on Long Island series – our signature annual event offering three unique opportunities for professional development. One event is designed for families to provide resources and leadership development in navigating the region’s Early Childhood system, and the other two events are designed for Early Childhood practitioners with two options to ensure accessibility of professional development content held the Saturday before and the day of Election Day.

LI-RTAC also provides site specific support, including quality program development and implementation, coaching, grant writing assistance, budgeting, CBO partnership engagement strategies, and more. Our technical assistance engages both our consultants and advisory board partners in increasing resources and customized support programs that may be needed to strengthen or start UPK.

Career Development & Leadership Services – LI-RTAC is proud to partner with the New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute through CUNY to lead our career development and leadership services. The Institute’s focus is working to establish and implement an early childhood workforce system to ensure funding, standards, competencies, and measures of accountability, so that every young child in New York has equitable access to excellence. LI-RTAC co-hosts the Institute with the Child Care Council of Nassau, one of our advisory board partners. The services provided include, but are not limited to, career advising, individualized and relationship-based professional development via executive coaching, career development, and more. The Institute also supports and/or hosts several

initiatives, including but not limited to, QUALITYstarsNY, New York Works for Children & The Aspire Registry, and Informal Family Child Care Project, and more. For more information regarding the Career Development Center, please visit www.earlychildhoodny.org/cdsc/longisland. For more information regarding the Leadership Initiative, please visit www.earlychildhoodny.org/leadershipinitiative/longisland.

Data, Research & Resource Development – LI-RTAC works with key partners using data and research to better understand the Pre-K and Early Childhood landscape. This includes enrollment patterns, funding, and key performance indicators measuring our work. We also engage in resource sharing to provide up-to-date information related to opportunities and changes practitioners need to know to ensure that they are set up for success in their Pre-K and/or Early Childhood programs.

Community Engagement: Families & Systems Leaders – LI-RTAC hosts a series of regularly scheduled meetings to foster cross-sector collaboration among Long Island constituencies doing the work of Early Childhood education. We create spaces to foster communication and share ideas among Early Childhood professionals, school districts, families, and supporting organizations. We also explore and/or develop emerging opportunities for collaboration, advocacy, and shared reflection. We also have our regular e-newsletters, Pre-K alerts and other electronic communication tools to support ongoing connection and partnership building.

History & Background

The origins of the LI-RTAC began as a cross-sector partnership initiative formed in 2014, known as, “The Long Island Pre-K Initiative.” The primary intent of LIPK was to strengthen partnerships among schools, community-based organizations and families; share research, policy guidance, and best practices in early learning; facilitate strategic coordination of cross-sector stakeholders on the importance of investing in Early Childhood opportunities, as well as consider new models of service in Pre-K and Early Childhood program delivery. The initiative also examined whether regional approaches might ameliorate some of the challenges associated with the expansion of Pre-K in our urban/suburban and rural settings.

The urgency of the initiative was formed based on several factors, including but not limited to, local and statewide student enrollment data, program location analysis, and survey data among Long Island families. Publicly funded opportunities for Pre-K on Long Island lag behind New York City and other parts of the state. In fact, Long Island was the least funded region in New York for close to eight years. For example, only 7 – 10% of eligible four-year-olds were receiving UPK in 2014, where in comparison, 100% of eligible four-year-olds received UPK in New York City that same year. Long Island continued to be the least funded region for the following six years based on data provided by New York State Education Department’s Office of Early Learning.

Additionally, when LIPK was formed (2014), there were only 59 state-funded Pre-K programs in Nassau and Suffolk school buildings, as well as many more in community-based organizations (CBOs). A regional landscape report funded by the Hagedorn Foundation identified a central issue shared among stakeholder interviews conducted from 2014–2016: schools and CBOs “were disconnected from each other – and from public agencies and nonprofits that were standing ready to provide support”.¹ Also, school leaders and community-based organizations shared significant structural challenges, funding disparities, and identification of needs based on individual district data posing “that it is difficult, if not impossible, for many Long Island districts to serve their children and their families”.²

In spite of the challenges experienced by schools and CBOs, the voice of families continues to be paramount in advocating for their children. “74% of Long Island residents supported public funding of Pre-K for all families” from a survey conducted by Stony Brook University Center for Survey Research and Rauch Foundation’s Long Island Index³. The survey also found “90% of Long Islanders agree that attending UPK for at least one year is important for the future success in school, and future prospects as an adult”.⁴ With high costs of private tuition, 78% of families either: a) barely exceeded income guidelines and were unable to receive a child care subsidy, but couldn’t afford child care at the risk of disrupting other household expenses or b) were eligible for a subsidy, yet were unable to receive support as both counties had exhausted funds. As a result, families shared that

¹ The Long Island Pre-K Initiative Progress Report – 9/1/24 – 4/15/16, Nassau BOCES

² <https://nyassembly.gov/write/upload/publichearing/000859/001564.pdf>

³ <https://citizenactionny.org/2015/03/10/long-islanders-overwhelmingly-want-pre-k-for-their-children/>

⁴ <https://citizenactionny.org/2015/03/10/long-islanders-overwhelmingly-want-pre-k-for-their-children/>

they were “forced to make-do with makeshift arrangements that disrupt their children’s learning and their own earning power”⁵

The aforementioned represented an urgent call to action to unite families, schools, child care, and community-based organizations to establish an initiative exclusively focused on addressing UPK needs on Long Island⁶. Continued navigation, strategic leadership between schools and CBOs, increased investments with key policy champions, cross-sector voices affirming the value of UPK investment, parent leadership advocating for dollars, and a steadily increasing demand, all play a part in the growth of UPK on Long Island.

The growth created a unique opportunity to create a dedicated space on Long Island focused directly on UPK and Early Childhood program access within our region. In identifying the type of space from which the region would benefit, the LIPK members engaged in conversations with State Education officials, elected officials, and advisory board partners recommending a regional technical assistance center (RTAC) model similar to other established models with different focuses across the state. As a result, the LIPK evolved to become the Long Island Regional Technical Assistance Center (LI-RTAC) for Pre-K and Early Childhood Education with a mission to increase quality, equity, access, and delivery of Pre-K and Early Childhood programs for Long Island’s children.

As the state’s first funded technical assistance center focused exclusively on UPK expansion, the LI-RTAC seeks to strengthen partnerships among school districts, community-based organizations, and other key stakeholders such as families, government entities, and the business community, to share information about research, policy, and best practices for early learning. With now over 90 districts with either a half or full-day UPK program serving over 58% of Long Island’s estimated four-year-old population, we continue to work intentionally toward our vision where one day, all children will have access to a robust, high quality UPK and Early Childhood program on Long Island, regardless of zip code.

⁵ <https://citizenactionny.org/2015/03/10/long-islanders-overwhelmingly-want-pre-k-for-their-children/>, Long Island Index – Rauch Foundation Access to Early Childhood Report

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qyEG5YTvsn0>

LI-RTAC Advisory Board Partners

Child Care Council of Nassau

Child Care Council of Nassau provides child care counseling and referrals to families, professional development, and technical assistance to providers, and offers services to employers interested in the child care needs of employees and their families. Through research and support of child care-friendly public policy and development, CCCN serves as an informational resource and public voice for issues facing Nassau County's diverse communities.

Child Care Council of Suffolk

Child Care Council of Suffolk works to support affordable, quality child care for Long Island's working families. The organization provides professional development opportunities for adults who work with young children to improve their knowledge and skills to ultimately improve child outcomes. They partner with businesses to maintain and increase access to quality child care on Long Island and work with parents to be good consumers of Early Childhood care.

Choice for All

Choice for All works to connect services, resources and opportunities for youth and families across Long Island to reach their fullest potential. Through programs, services, and community leadership development, Choice for All focuses on education, health, and economic justice with the vision of one day, all children will be healthy and thrive, regardless of zip code. Focused on education justice, Choice for All works to ensure all children, prenatal to career, have access to quality education in the communities we serve. This includes, but is not limited to, Early Childhood academic services, parent leadership development, special education advocacy, and capacity building for schools, child care, and nonprofits. Choice for All serves as the lead administrator for the LI-RTAC

Nassau BOCES

The Board of Cooperative Educational Services of Nassau County (Nassau BOCES) is the largest BOCES in New York State serving 56 school districts in Nassau County. Their mission has always been to enhance public education and the opportunities available to students of all ages and abilities by providing access to innovative and cost-effective services. Nassau BOCES serves as the fiscal agent for the LI-RTAC.

Eastern Suffolk BOCES

Eastern Suffolk BOCES, an inclusive educational cooperative of 51 Long Island school districts, provides regional leadership and advocacy, direct instruction, management, and support through quality, cost-effective instructional programs, and shared services. These programs and services maximize inclusive educational and career opportunities and equitable access for Long Island's diverse community promoting lifelong learning for both children and adults to achieve excellence and enhance the operational effectiveness of the region.

Western Suffolk BOCES

Western Suffolk Board of Cooperative Educational Services provides educational programs and opportunities to meet distinct needs within 18 local school districts. One of three BOCES on Long Island, Western Suffolk BOCES provides 70 services to two or more districts more economically and efficiently than one district alone can provide. Western Suffolk BOCES helps school-age children and adults gain the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in the workplace.

New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute at CUNY

The New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute leads the work to establish and implement an early childhood workforce system to ensure funding, standards and competencies, career development resources, qualifications and credentials, professional development, (training and strength-based coaching) program quality assurance, and improvement for individuals who work with young children throughout New York.

Long Island Regional Leadership Initiative

The goal of the Institute's Leadership Initiative is to support a cadre of high-quality, exemplary early childhood leaders, as well as to create a pipeline of professionals who are well-prepared to enter leadership positions, and are supported once they enter those positions. They help participants identify and meet individualized leadership development goals through a comprehensive model aligned to best practices in leadership and management criteria, and tailored to the needs of each individual. Through leadership-focused professional development and career planning, participants access support for higher education and credentials, mentoring, peer learning, seminars, conferences, and competency-based professional development. They also provide career development support that includes career advisement and planning, as well as search assistance.

Purpose & Scope of Roundtables

With 90 school districts across our region⁷ adopting either full or half-day Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK), close to 60% of Long Island’s estimated four-year-old population are securing a seat⁸. Given the emerging landscape on Long Island, the LI-RTAC endeavors to bring together stakeholders in understanding, navigating and addressing issues that directly impact UPK. During the 2023-2024 School Year, we held four roundtables:

| Date | Roundtable | Location |
|------------------|--|-----------------------|
| October 12, 2023 | Nassau County Superintendents and Administrators | Nassau BOCES |
| October 31, 2023 | Nonprofits, Center-Based Organizations, Community-Based Organizations and Family Daycare Providers (CBO) | Virtual |
| November 1, 2023 | | |
| February 7, 2024 | Suffolk County Superintendents and Administrators | Eastern Suffolk BOCES |



Participants in Nassau County October 2023 roundtable engaging in breakout sessions



Participants in Suffolk County February 2024 roundtable learning about goals for the session

The focus of the roundtables was four-fold:

- **Unified Approaches & Advocacy Opportunities:** Explore unified approaches to Pre-K and Early Childhood advocacy by identifying strengths, challenges, and next steps.
- **Funding Opportunities:** Learn about Pre-K grants that increase funding per student and grant writing assistance.
- **Professional Development & Technical Assistance:** Learn more about opportunities for professional development and technical assistance through the LI-RTAC.
- **Assessing Current Landscape:** Understand and navigate the emerging Universal Pre-K landscape on Long Island through small-group facilitated discussion.

Key Themes

Across all roundtables, attendees expressed strong support of UPK and its benefits for pre-school children, as well as its subsequent positive impact on these children throughout their PK-12 school trajectory and beyond. Among the positive impacts shared were the ability to provide early

⁷ <https://www.newsday.com/long-island/education/long-island-school-district-prekindergarten-programs-state-funding-kb4vev78>

⁸ <https://www.newsday.com/opinion/the-point/long-island-universal-prekindergarten-upk-new-york-d6vlrsnz>

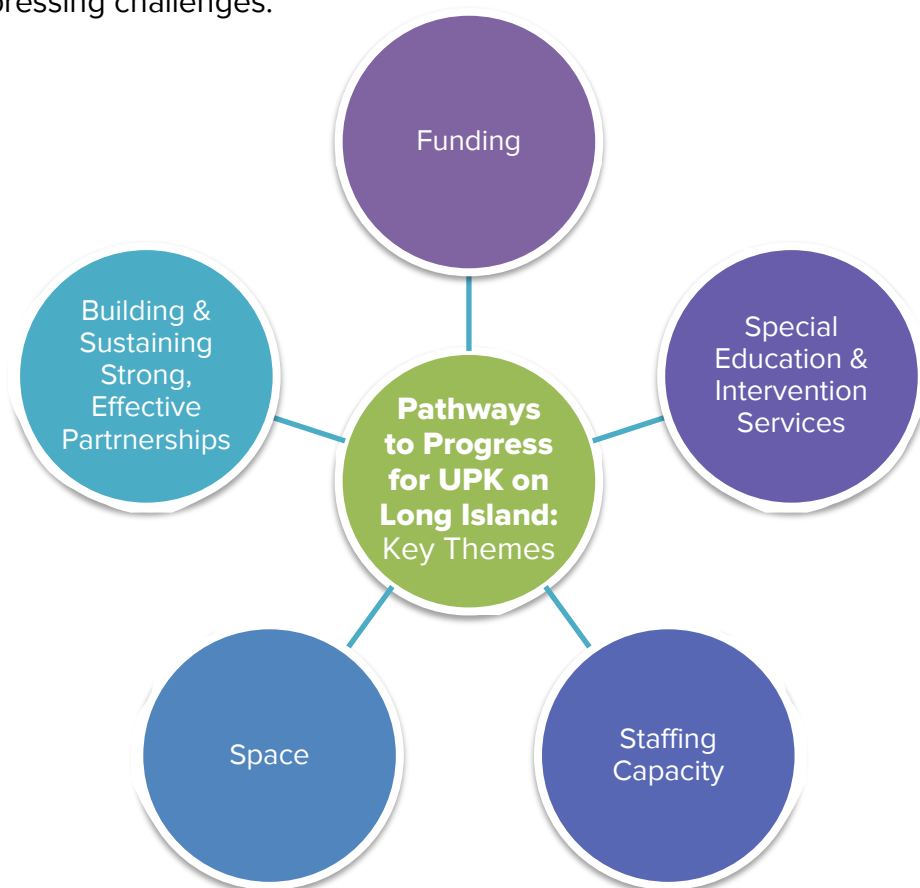
intervention to in-district students before kindergarten when it can have such an important impact; student readiness for kindergarten and creating family engagement and partnerships early on in a child's educational life, among many other positives.

While there was strong support for quality, developmentally appropriate practices that positively impact children in pre-kindergarten settings, both CBO roundtables raised concerns regarding potential enrollment challenges, particularly for three-and-four-year-olds programs, where families, due to a myriad of factors, (e.g., affordability) are shifting from child care programs to UPK programs.

During both Nassau & Suffolk administrator roundtables, participants overall shared the importance of partnering with community-based organizations, and stressed the critical value of schools connecting with all community resources, including existing Early Childhood spaces. There was discussion regarding filling the gap in child care deserts as well as expressed desire to extend professional development opportunities to be more accessible by location. Similar views were shared by advisory board partners in follow-up meetings and acknowledged through collaboration meetings with state entities--NYSED and NYS OCFS. (LI-RTAC continues to explore such issues intentionally for our region, including but not limited to: a) research activities to identify barriers and opportunities to support state policy to enable partnerships between districts and CBOs, and b) identifying enrollment trends of students in district-led and staffed UPK school programs)

Overall, both from the administrator/district and CBO roundtables, and from follow-up conversations with some participants to further drill down key points, five major themes emerged as current challenges to maintaining and expanding access to UPK for all four-year-olds that is fundamental to their early emotional and academic development.

Funding, special education, staffing, space, and building strong partnerships, are the common themes that arose among participants regarding areas where they experience the most pressing challenges.



Funding

During all the roundtables, funding consistently emerged as the most significant obstacle to sustaining and expanding access to a UPK program for all four-year-olds on Long Island. School administrators underscored this challenge by comparing the funding disparities between UPK and kindergarten programs. For example, one superintendent shared:

“How would it be possible to expect that every district four-year-old can be served in a UPK program as every five-year-old is served in a kindergarten program when there is no parity between the budgets allocated for each?”

Despite UPK requirements being similar to, and in some cases exceeding those of kindergarten, the funding allocated to UPK—both by New York State and through district budgets—is substantially lower than what is budgeted for kindergarten programs.

Feedback from the CBO roundtables consistently detailed how on Long Island, the \$5400 per student, which, outside of the Expansion Grant or other specialized circumstances, appears to be the primary allocation per UPK students since 2005, cannot sufficiently support taking in district UPK students who they would otherwise welcome, if not for the funding challenges in a district/CBO collaborative partnership. As a result, many districts are unable to utilize their UPK allocations as they do not have space to provide a program on-site, and are unable to find CBO partners who can accommodate their students from a financial perspective.

Consistently, both school district and CBO leaders agree that without a significant increase in funding from a variety of sources, a truly universal Pre-K program that serves every age-eligible child will remain out of reach on Long Island

Funding Streams

Unanimously, school districts and CBOs point out that the complexity of the UPK funding streams often complicates efforts to create or expand their UPK programs, and they encouraged more simplicity in how districts could utilize allocated funds. At times, the complexity of the process of how New York State funds must be used, particularly when it comes to the order of spending, was such that many districts could not even fully articulate the specifics of what needs to change except that the allocation and spending process needs to be simpler.

At the roundtables, it was shared that the New York State Department of Education Office of Early Learning (NYSED OEL) was hoping to address the consolidation of funding streams for legislative consideration, and the district administrators enthusiastically expressed support and appreciation for those efforts.

School districts explained that sometimes the parameters tied to expansion grants unintentionally discourage instructional and programmatic staff from expanding UPK

programming. The discrepancy between the \$10,000 per new student provided in the Expansion Grant, and the \$5400 otherwise allocated by the state per existing student seat creates a financial inequity within the current CBO partnership, as well as potential inequity among additional partnerships. In a challenged budget climate, districts often decide against expanding their UPK programs, and prioritize preserving the existing seats, as they cannot afford to cover the funding gap between the \$10,000 for the new UPK places and children already enrolled. The financial strain of the current funding model creates challenges and unintended consequences that affect children, businesses, and communities, even when grant funding is available.

Transportation

District partnerships often involve collaborations with CBOs located outside of their boundaries because either no providers exist within their boundaries, or the local providers cannot offer early care and education placement due to space or financial challenges. Currently, there is no dedicated transportation aid for UPK which significantly limits families' access to care. Without transportation support, families cannot take advantage of available UPK slots in neighboring communities if they are unable to transport their child to the program on their own.

Food Services

Currently, there is no standardized approach to providing meals—breakfast, lunch, and snacks—for UPK children. In some districts, parents are responsible for preparing their children's meals, while in others, meals are provided by CBO or the district's home school on site. The inconsistency across Early Childhood programs means that UPK children from the same district may experience varying approaches to meal provision. Establishing a consistent method of food delivery would ensure that all Pre-K students who qualify for free and reduced lunch in the district K-12 setting would receive it in all UPK settings.

Special Education & Intervention Services

The ability to successfully support students with disabilities in UPK programs is a key challenge that districts and CBOs face, and that emerged as a central theme.

Both districts and CBOs point to the challenge of finding a sufficient number of placements for children with disabilities in UPK. Because there are not sufficient placements, many CPSE students who would otherwise be in a school setting end up being serviced through a patchwork of outside services that do not put them directly in a school setting. As a result, districts raise concerns that they are not fulfilling these children's needs to the extent possible.

Districts suggest that a less complicated procedure for becoming a 4410 (special education approved site) would significantly help to ease the pressure of finding appropriate placements for all students requiring special education. Conversations in collaboration meetings with state partners have stressed the importance of creating integrated co-teaching inclusion models, regardless of provider type of a 4410 school, in district or through a community-based organization/child care provider.

Roundtable participants also suggest a more streamlined process for establishing a 4410 school. For example, at present, they shared that the application process does not recognize that they are already operating as a school district with K-12 classrooms, and the application process requires them to engage in time-consuming data collection as if they were not already acting as a school district, but applying as an entirely new entity. Districts suggest instead that the application process starts from their point of K-12 accreditation and that the application process focuses on the special requirements for UPK four-year-olds that must be in place, rather than general safety and building requirements, etc. that are already implemented as part of the district's accreditation.

By encouraging districts to focus on the specialized needs of four-year-olds in their application process, it was suggested that NYSED would not only streamline the process of applying to be a 4410 school, making it more likely that districts apply, but would also encourage districts to deeply reflect on creating inclusive programs that address the specialized needs of these younger children. This sentiment was reflected in the comments of district administrators who spoke very positively about the Site Visit aspect of the 4410 application process where valuable information and feedback is conveyed directly regarding special education in the UPK program. This UPK targeted feedback and insight directly supports the district in moving forward in successfully being accredited as a 4410 school, and opening up opportunities for them to reach out to and support their four-year-olds with disabilities.

Districts also talked about the length of the present 4410 process. Because of the time involved from applying to approval, new programs cannot start the next year. As a result, they will need to wait two years in the future – continuing to widen the gap of students not being placed for services due to extensive waiting lists. Districts are eager to begin serving them in a full UPK setting earlier, and parents are disappointed to have their children remain on waiting lists.

District and CBO administrators also encourage further partnership with Suffolk and Nassau counties. Comments included the need for counties to review their budgets in terms of their allocations for CPSE services as participants agreed that increases in county CPSE funds were indicated to ensure that all children received the appropriate services in the maximum effective setting. These included such services as speech and language and OT by itinerant providers who often are spread thin among several locations and settings. Presenting further challenge, while these providers are sometimes able to stack services for younger children of different ages, seeing several children in one setting on a single day, this cost-efficiency does not present itself when it comes to a single district program limited to only UPK students. As a result, districts often struggle to provide special needs students with the same services they had been receiving in their three-year-old and younger programs. Access to providers becomes more limited without service consolidation.

Roundtable participants expressed support for NYSED's comprehensive study of alternative tuition rate-setting methodologies for approved providers of pre-school special education programs designed to ensure students with disabilities receive education and related services in accordance with their IEPs, now in process.

Staffing Capacity

Teacher workforce shortage is a significant challenge for both CBOs and district schools, exacerbated by the complexities of the Early Childhood system. Two different regulatory agencies require varying educational requirements for lead teachers, adding to the difficulties. The Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), which oversees Early Childhood settings including CBOs that house UPK programs, requires lead teachers in non-UPK preschool classrooms to hold only a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. This is in stark contrast to the Birth-2 Early Childhood Teacher certification required for lead teachers in state-funded UPK classrooms.

CBOs are particularly affected by staffing shortages, which in turn impact school districts that rely on partnerships with CBOs to run their UPK programs. During roundtable discussions, CBO directors repeatedly emphasized that recruiting and retaining qualified staff is a major obstacle to maintaining consistent, high-quality UPK programs.

A key factor driving these challenges is the wage disparity between CBOs and district schools. Certified early childhood teachers in school districts typically earn starting salaries of \$60,000 or more with benefits, while CBOs offer average salaries between \$35,000 and \$40,000 for certified teachers working a 12-month calendar year. This significant wage penalty makes it difficult for CBOs to attract and retain certified teachers, particularly when higher paying positions become available in school districts. Additionally, the lack of access to state pension systems further discourages long-term commitment from Early Childhood staff working in CBOs. CBOs also experience challenges in hiring and retaining classroom assistant teachers. Rising minimum wages in industries like retail and fast food have made salaries for classroom assistant teachers in early care and education centers (both CBOs and district schools) less competitive. These systemic issues create persistent pressure on CBOs and threaten the stability and quality of UPK in an already fragile Early Childhood system.

Space

Concerns persist about the insufficient space available to provide enough seats for UPK children, even for those whose placements are funded through state allocations. Due to the limited space available in districts, CBOs are often best positioned to provide UPK to Long Island children. However, the current cost model makes it challenging for smaller CBOs to absorb the losses that would be involved in doing so. CBO directors shared that with increased per child funding, they could, in some cases, expand the number of seats they offer to district UPK children. Many CBOs have additional space and classrooms available, but do not have sufficient funds to grow their programs to accommodate more children.

While districts in other parts of the state are experiencing significant declines in enrollment - allowing programs to repurpose existing classroom space for UPK - this is not the case for most Long Island districts. District leaders shared that in many cases, they would need to undertake new construction projects to create the appropriate space needed to house UPK classrooms. Such projects require significant costs, long-term planning and substantial investment.

While building aid is available for UPK classrooms on district sites, the financial burden of these projects remains a concern, and districts are hesitant to take on such large investments due to the uncertainty of future demographic trends and needs within their school communities.

Building & Sustaining Strong, Effective Partnerships

CBOs and school districts indicate the need to establish intentional, coordinated system-level partnerships to support UPK on Long Island. Currently, districts and CBOs operating within the same neighborhood or proximate catchment areas often lack established relationships unless they are already working together.

As UPK has expanded across most districts on Long Island, districts new to UPK are not always aware of the potential partnerships available with nearby or neighboring district CBOs. Similarly, CBOs have expressed the need to establish a clear and transparent process to connect with districts interested in future collaborations.

With UPK continuing to grow on Long Island, there have been many case examples of missed opportunities for CBO and district collaboration. For example, as new CBOs open in proximity to districts seeking a community-based UPK partner, there is no coordinated system to bridge connections between school districts and local early care and education programs. CBOs stressed the importance of having a process to introduce themselves to districts before the formal Request for Proposal (RFP) process, allowing for more proactive relationships and collaboration opportunities.

CBOs and districts agree that a coordinated early care and education system is essential to ensuring that all four-year-olds have access to high-quality UPK, laying the foundation for positive developmental and educational outcomes. Achieving this requires ongoing collaboration to align curriculum, social-emotional development, and other educational goals as part of a seamless Pre-K to Grade 12 pathway.

Districts and CBOs agree on the need to establish communication methods to create a more cohesive system. Several recommendations were shared during the roundtable discussions, which include:

- **Examining Curriculum & Learning Goals:** Create opportunities for collaboration between UPK and K-2 teachers across CBO and school districts to examine curriculum and learning goals.
- **Transition Plans:** Develop transition plans to support children moving from UPK into the district kindergarten.
- **Inclusion of Pre-K in District Professional Development:** Include UPK teachers in staff development within the district's professional development plan, including contracted child care providers/community-based organizations.

CBOs and districts both recognize the importance of UPK as the initial foundation of an articulated Pre-K through Grade 12 education. In those instances where districts and CBOs have established ongoing methods to ensure communication, both CBOs and districts feel that they are working seamlessly to set this foundation.

Both districts and CBOs value the support of organizations like Office of Early Learning (OEL), OCFS, the Childcare Councils of Nassau and Suffolk County, and QUALITYstarsNY

among others. A need to create clear paths for collaboration among these organizations was recommended to strengthen the success and expansion of UPK on Long Island.

Expanding families as partners is important to further articulate and connect UPK with the overall elementary school program. Including UPK parents in district Parent /Teacher Organizations is one way to integrate UPK into an overall P-12 school system. Additionally, building parent leadership within UPK program design is important to consider, including curriculum extensions, advocacy for funding, and integrating parent engagement into school activities early on.

District administrators frequently raised the challenge of before-and-after-school care for their UPK children, which many working families need. Establishing partnerships with local CBOs that can provide this care on-site is seen as a key factor in supporting UPK's success and increasing parent commitment. Districts partnering with CBOs value the ability of many of the CBOs to offer this care, making this a real plus.

Recommendations & Actions

The purpose of the 2023-2024 roundtables was to explore 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.⁹ 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 Effective Partnerships**, as follows:

- **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.

⁹ New York State Office of Early Learning Enrollment Data - <https://www.nysed.gov/early-learning/prekindergarten-data>

- **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.

**LONG ISLAND
REGIONAL TECHNICAL
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