

**CENTER FOR NEW YORK CITY AFFAIRS  
THE NEW SCHOOL**

# **Big Dreams for New York City's Youngest Children**

The future of early care and education

*by* KENDRA HURLEY AND ABIGAIL KRAMER  
WITH MYRA ROSENBAUM AND ALISON MILLER

CENTER FOR NEW YORK CITY AFFAIRS  
AT THE NEW SCHOOL

Summer 2014



The Center for New York City Affairs is dedicated to advancing innovative public policies that strengthen neighborhoods, support families and reduce urban poverty.

Our tools include rigorous analysis; journalistic research; candid public dialogue with stakeholders; and strategic planning with government officials, nonprofit practitioners and community residents.

Clara Hemphill, Interim Director  
& Insideschools.org Founding Editor

Kim Nauer, Education Project Director

Pamela Wheaton, Insideschools.org Managing Editor

Kendra Hurley, Senior Editor

Abigail Kramer, Associate Editor

Jacqueline Wayans, Administrative Coordinator

Additional reporting and analysis for this report provided by Myra Rosenbaum and Alison Miller.

Editing by Abigail Kramer and Kendra Hurley

Design by Michael Fusco, [www.mpluse.net](http://www.mpluse.net)

Proofreading by Aimee Sabo

This report is made possible thanks to the generous support of the Child Care and Early Education Fund and the longstanding vision and guidance of Andrew White.

Copyright © 2014 The New School

Center for New York City Affairs

72 Fifth Avenue, 6th floor

New York, NY 10011

Tel 212.229.5418

Fax 212.229.5335

[centernyc@newschool.edu](mailto:centernyc@newschool.edu)

## CONTENTS

1	Executive Summary
4	Before EarlyLearn
6	Reinventing the System: The Vision of EarlyLearn
7	Recommendations and Solutions
14	The Context: High Aspirations, Limited Funding
16	Subsidized Child Care in New York City
19	The Struggle to Improve Program Quality
24	Raising the Bar for a Few Programs
28	Empty Seats
37	Can Small Programs Survive?
40	The Workforce: A Coming Exodus?
42	Higher Standards for Teachers
43	Infants and Toddlers
46	An Unequal Distribution of Child Care Vouchers
48	Universal Pre-K and the Future of EarlyLearn

## CHARTS, MAPS AND TABLES

2	Service to Need Ratio
3	Service to Need Ratio Change
12	How Enrollment Has Changed by Program Type
13	Changes in Enrollment by Program Type and Age
30	Total Number of Children in City-Subsidized Child Care
31	Total Number of Children in City-Contracted Child Care Centers and Family Child Care Homes
32	Number of Children in City-Contracted Child Care Centers
33	Number of Children in City-Contracted Family Child Care Homes
34	Number of Children Using Child Care and Afterschool Vouchers
35	Number of Children Using Vouchers in Child Care Centers
36	Number of Children Using Vouchers in Family Child Care Homes
38	Change in Program Size

# Big Dreams for New York City's Youngest Children

The future of early care and education

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In October 2012, New York City put a plan into action that would upend its system for providing subsidized child care to working class and low-income families. The Bloomberg administration set out to take the city's large and unwieldy assortment of early care and education programs—ranging from subsidized babysitting services to nationally accredited preschools—and blend them into a unified, holistic system serving children aged 6 weeks to 4 years old. Officials intended for this new system to spur improvements in quality, giving children the kind of rich learning experiences that would set them on track for educational success for years to come.

These reforms followed on seven decades of subsidized child care in New York City, reshaping a system that had grown into a cumbersome and many-headed creature. For years, programs had been financed by a snarl of federal, state and city funding sources, each with a different mission and each subject to a separate set of regulations. “A child might lose eligibility for child care, but still be eligible for pre-k. Does the program keep the child and swallow the loss of funding?” asks Betty Holcomb, policy director at the Center for Children's Initiatives, an early childhood advocacy organization. “The competing and sometimes conflicting regulations made it very hard to deliver the services smoothly, and to make sure programs best meet family needs.”

With its new \$486 million initiative, EarlyLearnNYC, the city merged the largest funding streams and channeled them into classrooms and family child care homes to offer the best elements of each of the previously existing models. Under the new vision, babies and young children would get far more than a safe space while their parents worked: The new approach would take advantage of that finite time when a child's brain is developing most rapidly, laying the foundation for positive and lifelong cognitive, social, emotional and physical gains.

The EarlyLearn plan reflected fast-growing knowledge of the limitations of traditional child care. Nationwide, studies have shown that most child care arrangements fail to support young children's development in a meaningful way, with most child care centers being rated poor to mediocre—particularly those serving low-income and minority children. In New York City, government assessments of child care centers had long focused less on children's experiences and learning than on whether, say, the refrigerator was maintained at the correct temperature. In some family child care programs in people's homes, toddlers whiled away large chunks of their first years watching videos.

*continued on page 3*

*\*In this report, the term “early education” refers to care that helps older children with school readiness while “child care” may refer to all programs that allow parents to work, whether or not they have an educational component. The term “child care” also refers to a specific funding stream.*

*Under  
EarlyLearn,  
child care  
practices would  
be grounded in  
research about  
what works in  
early education.*

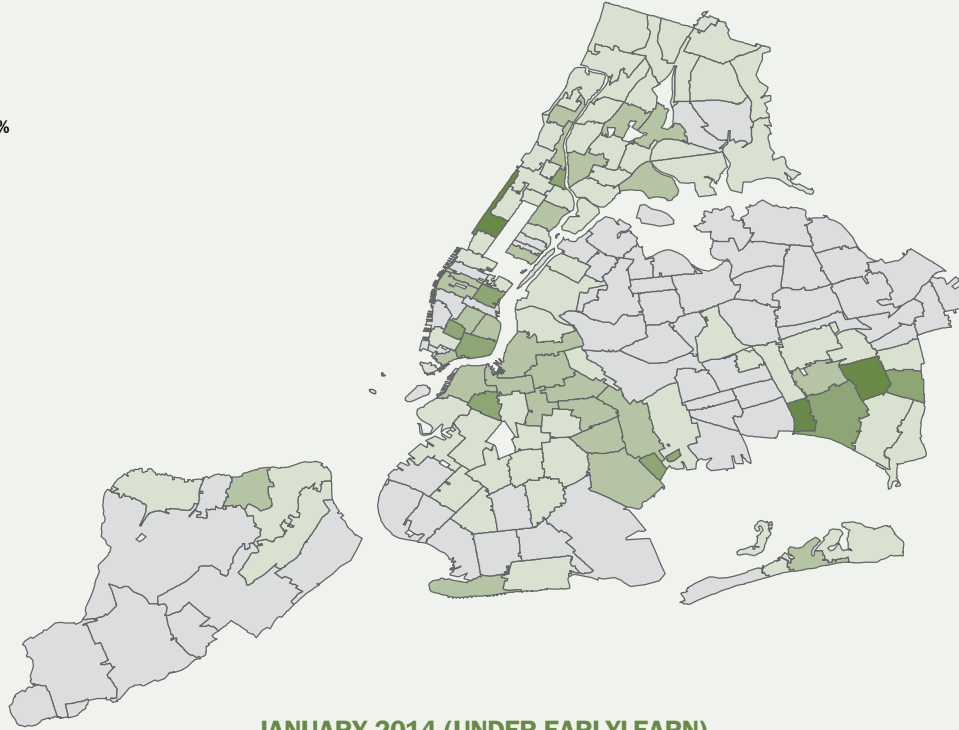
**SERVICE TO NEED RATIO:**

**WHAT PERCENTAGE OF ELIGIBLE KIDS WERE BEING SERVED BY CITY-FUNDED PROGRAMS AND VOUCHERS?**

Service to Need Ratio equals the total program enrollment by zip code divided by the total need, defined by number of children 6 and under living under 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

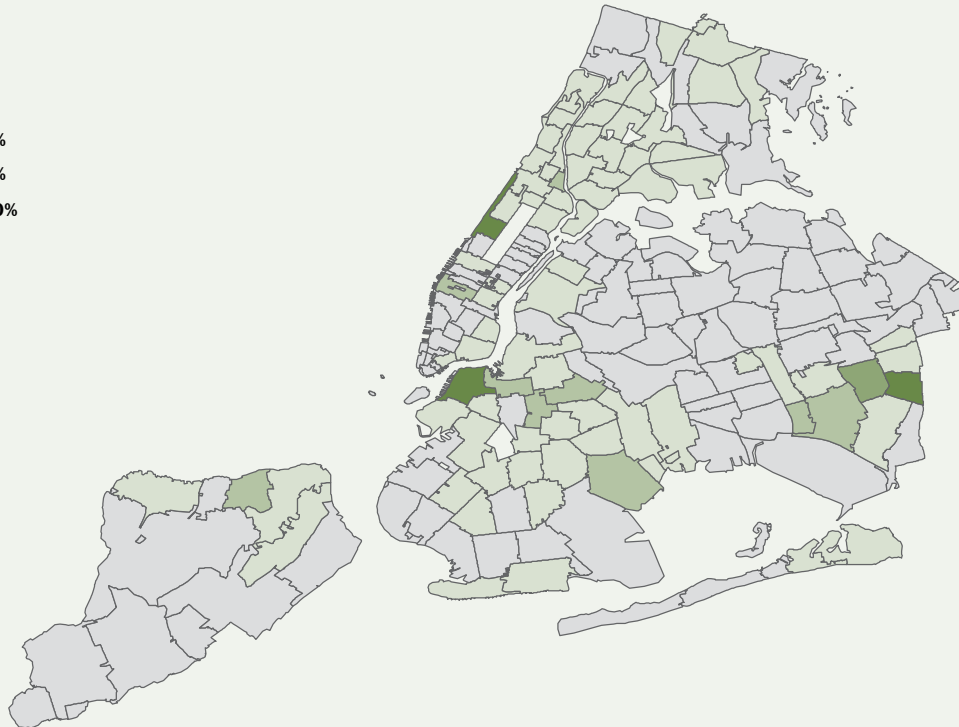
**JANUARY 2012 (BEFORE EARLYLEARN)**

- 0%-25%
- 26%-50%
- 51%-75%
- 76%-100%
- >100%



**JANUARY 2014 (UNDER EARLYLEARN)**

- 0%-25%
- 26%-50%
- 51%-75%
- 76%-100%
- >100%



**DATA SOURCE:** ACS and 2008-2012 American Community Service. Service to Need Ratio equals the total program enrollment by zip code divided by the total need, defined by number of children 6 and under living under 200% of the Federal Poverty Level. Zip code boundaries are approximations based on 2010 Census Zip Code Tabulation Areas.

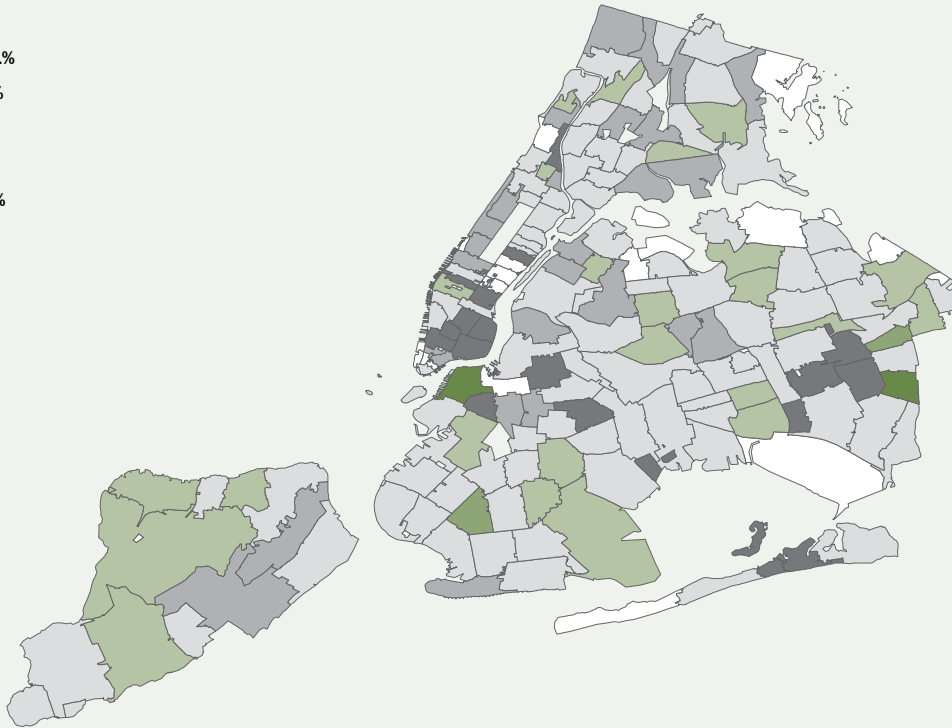
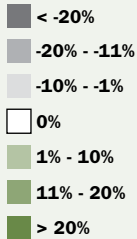
**NOTE:** January 2014 numbers do not include Head Start programs funded directly by the federal government or programs chosen by the City Council to provide care outside of the EarlyLearn system. These programs serve approximately 9,000 children.

## SERVICE TO NEED RATIO CHANGE:

### HOW DID THE PERCENTAGE OF ELIGIBLE KIDS BEING SERVED CHANGE IN EACH NEIGHBORHOOD?

The Service to Need Ratio for children being served by city-funded programs and vouchers dropped across most of the city but increased in Staten Island. Service to Need Ratio equals the total program enrollment by zip code divided by the total need, defined by number of children 6 and under living under 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

#### JANUARY 2012 TO JANUARY 2014



**DATA SOURCE:** ACS and 2009-2012 American Community Service. Zip code boundaries are approximations based on 2010 Census Zip Code Tabulation Areas.

**NOTE:** January 2014 numbers do not include Head Start programs funded directly by the federal government or programs chosen by the City Council to provide care outside of the EarlyLearn system. These programs serve approximately 9,000 children.

*continued from page 1*

Under EarlyLearn, child care practices would be grounded in research about what works in early education. It would require a talented workforce of teachers; extensive professional development; low child-teacher ratios so that children would receive individualized, developmentally appropriate attention; and improvements in program quality rooted in thoughtful assessments of each child's growth. As in Head Start, EarlyLearn providers would engage families as active partners in their children's development.

The city's institutional child care providers and antipoverty advocates applauded this new vision. However, when the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) announced its contract awards in May 2012, it became clear that the new approach would cause a massive upheaval in the system. Many longstanding child care programs lost their contracts, while others received funding to serve neighborhoods where they had little or no history. Programs became more concentrated under large organizations. Dozens of small programs were eliminated.

As these organizations prepared to implement EarlyLearn in the fall of 2012, a fundamental problem became clear: The funding allotted to the initiative was not adequate for the grand scope of its vision. The remaining small child care programs suffered the most. The new system expected them to adopt more rigorous standards—many of which had long existed in the Head Start model—while

## BEFORE EARLYLEARN: NYC SUBSIDIZED EARLY CARE

The EarlyLearn reform was intended to create greater coherence within the city's sprawling and unwieldy subsidized child care system. Its contracts attempt to integrate several distinct models of care, preserving and blending the best aspects of each.

Prior to EarlyLearn, the most significant subsidized early care and education programs included:

- **Head Start** programs, designed to provide high-quality early education to very poor children and offering intensive services and access to family supports—but often in as few as 3 ½ hours per day.
- **Center-based child care** programs that were primarily intended to allow low-income parents to work. These placed children in classrooms at community centers, storefront programs and in long-established settlement houses.
- Licensed, home-based **family day care** programs, also meant to cover the full workday, but typically with less of an educational focus, fewer associated services, and caregivers with only modest formal training.
- Community-based **universal pre-kindergarten** (UPK) programs, which were focused on preparing 4-year-olds for school but, in most cases, provided just a few hours each day of care.

In some cases, community-based UPK and Head Start were linked with center-based child care, so that parents could rely on a full workday of care.

Since the mid-1990s, the city has also distributed thousands of child care vouchers each year to low-income families, which they can use in any setting they choose. The cost of these vouchers has ballooned over the past decade. Since the launch of EarlyLearn, the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) has made efforts to steer voucher recipients into its contracted programs, with limited success.

giving them less money per child than Head Start programs, and paying most teachers the significantly lower salaries of child care workers. Even many large programs soon struggled with funding. Indeed, the mismatch between funding and expectations has turned out to be the initiative's single biggest stumbling block.

"The idea and the prospect of what they planned to have happen are great," says Jinny Zhong, a program director at Hamilton-Madison House Inc. "It's great for the family and it's great for the kid. The downside of it is making sure the quality is there without the technical support."

"The model is powerful. The intent is good. EarlyLearn has been completely underfunded," says Sherry Cleary, executive director of the New York City Professional Development Institute for early educators at the City University of New York.

"They came up with a good model but they forgot to fund it," agrees Michael Zisser, the executive director of University Settlement, a century-old nonprofit with early childhood programs in Manhattan and Brooklyn. "You can't pay for the things you signed up to do with the money you were given."

More than a year and a half after the city rolled out EarlyLearn, the Center for New York City Affairs at The New School conducted several dozen interviews with program directors, early childhood experts, policy makers, advocates, parents, front line workers, union leaders and other stakeholders to assess EarlyLearn's impact: Had the strength of its vision compensated for the shortage in funding? If not, was the child care system merely experiencing growth pains that would eventually lead to better outcomes for children? Or

had EarlyLearn, in fact, hurt the quality of child care?

Our findings are mixed. Children, families, and the programs themselves have experienced gains in some areas and setbacks in others. Our key findings include:

- Enrollment has proven to be a major problem systemwide. This is nothing new: The city's child care system has remained stubbornly under-enrolled for nearly a decade, with utilization rates languishing between 80 and 85 percent since 2007 and dropping sharply at the start of EarlyLearn. Enrollment has recently rebounded to close to 90 percent. Under EarlyLearn, however, providers' funding is tied to enrollment—the city no longer pays for empty seats as it once did. Therefore even a few missing children can destabilize a program's budget, making it harder to achieve the quality improvements at the heart of the EarlyLearn reform.
- The total number of children enrolled in city-subsidized child care declined by 17,000 between January 2012 and January 2014. In January 2012, there were 118,374 children enrolled in

contracted programs or paying for care with vouchers. In January 2014, there were 30,207 children in city-contracted EarlyLearn programs; 66,992 receiving vouchers; and about 4,100 in City Council-funded programs that are managed separately from EarlyLearn, for a total of about 101,300 children.

- Large programs, which have been able to draw from their own resources to fulfill the new requirements, have generally fared best under EarlyLearn. Some have used the initiative as a springboard to forge truly creative programming and collaborations and to dramatically strengthen the quality of their programs. Lutheran Social Services has partnered with an education school to train its teaching staff in some of the latest practices in early childhood education; Brooklyn Kindergarten Society has carved out time for its teachers to use child assessments to deepen their work; EarlyLearn has motivated Episcopal Social Services to expand its staff to provide families with more onsite services, including a mental health consultant.
- Many smaller programs now operate at a deficit, and their directors say the programs have been starved of resources and their workforces neglected. Some fear having to close their doors, and have come to see the quality improvements heralded by EarlyLearn as burdensome, unfunded mandates.
- Although expectations of teachers have increased, their salaries have not. With the city's universal pre-kindergarten (UPK) expansion gearing up, directors at large and small programs alike say they are bracing for what may be a mass exodus of their most talented EarlyLearn teachers to the better-paying Department of Education jobs.
- The city's subsidized child care system is insufficiently funded from the top down—a reality that puts intense strain on the providers who run programs under EarlyLearn contracts with ACS. The cost of the child care system has ballooned over the past decade, almost entirely due to an increase in the use of child care vouchers, which the city is mandated by federal law to provide to families receiving or transitioning off of cash assistance benefits. Between 1999 and 2013, the number of children using mandated vouchers rose by more than two-thirds, to nearly 57,000. The result is a recurring \$90 million hole in ACS's budget—a structural deficit that squeezes the city's entire subsidized child care system as well as other parts of the children's services agency, according to city officials. Because it cannot overspend, ACS must shift the burden of voucher expenses internally, taking dollars away from other programs and services.
- Each year, the city also pays for thousands of non-mandated vouchers to help working class families pay for child care and afterschool programs. In theory, these vouchers should be available to working families across the city. However, as of the beginning of 2014, nearly 50 percent of the vouchers for these families were used at child care and afterschool programs in the Williamsburg and Borough Park neighborhoods of Brooklyn—home to politically influential Orthodox Jewish communities. Even outside of those neighborhoods, yeshivas and other Jewish religious organizations were by far the biggest recipients of voucher funds: Of all the vouchers used at formal day care centers and schools in January 2014, nearly 80 percent were paid to Jewish religious organizations, according to our analysis of city data.

Orthodox communities have a pressing need for subsidized child care. Borough Park has the highest density of income-eligible children of any neighborhood in the city, and the Orthodox community in Williamsburg is not far behind, according to Census data. What's more, subsidized secular programs may not be equipped to meet the needs of Orthodox families. However, other high-need communities such as East New York, Jamaica and the University Heights and Highbridge neighborhoods in the Bronx receive comparatively few of these child care vouchers.

- There are far fewer small, neighborhood-based organizations participating in city-contracted early care and education today, compared to two years ago. In 2012, there were 131 organizations

*“The model is powerful. The intent is good. EarlyLearn has been completely underfunded.”*



## REINVENTING THE SYSTEM: THE VISION OF EARLYLEARN

EarlyLearn attempts to improve quality throughout the city's child care system. By imposing more rigorous program requirements, it aims to leverage low-income parents' need for daytime care as an opportunity to provide their kids with rich learning experiences that can have lifelong benefits. Many of its standards come straight from the Head Start model and are intended to provide programming that responds to children's individual and developmental needs, and that supports not only children, but their families as well. Under EarlyLearn, child care centers and family child care homes are held to newly uniform standards:

- All programs, including in-home family child care programs, must use a scientifically tested curriculum.
- All programs must formally screen children for developmental and mental health impairments within 45 days of beginning care.
- All programs must conduct formal assessments to track children's development and educational progress.
- Teaching staff at center-based programs must receive 12 days per year of professional development services. Staff in family child care networks receive 6 days per year.
- All programs must provide support services to children's families.
- All programs must run for eight to 10 hours per day and 12 months per year.
- All family child care programs, which serve the majority of EarlyLearn's babies and toddlers, are connected to center-based programs where children can move when they turn 3.

running a single, city-contracted child care site, and 20 running a single Head Start. In 2014, there are just 60 single-site providers in the EarlyLearn program. While larger programs may be better able to weather the financial challenges of EarlyLearn, smaller programs are often embedded deeply into the fabric of communities, with the capacity to build leadership and trust. In some cases they have met communities' particular needs for generations.

- In the EarlyLearn vision, data and documentation are gathered to raise program quality. Information from child assessments, family intake forms and programs' self-assessments are to be used to tailor instruction to students' and classes' particular needs; provide referrals for neighborhood services targeted to family needs; and offer technical assistance from ACS as well as in-house professional development catered to programs' needs. Gathering this data is time-consuming, and some programs struggle to keep up with the paperwork it entails. Programs that are rich on resources are most likely to use the data to inform and improve program quality. Some find the detailed information generated from child assessments and program self-assessments to be particularly insightful about the unique strengths and challenges of teachers, classes and students.
- The total number of child care slots for infants and toddlers has not significantly expanded, as the original EarlyLearn plan intended. Despite a high need for early care services for children under 3, the number of infants and toddlers in contracted, home-based care—where most young children are served—has barely budged, rising from 4,358 in July 2012 to 4,551 in January 2014.

Most advocates, directors, and policymakers continue to agree on one large positive aspect of EarlyLearn: Its vision of quality has held strong. By redesigning expectations of child care in the interest of benefiting kids, EarlyLearn has given the city a framework on which to build. If given the resources it needs to work as intended, some say, it could truly soar.

"After 50 or 60 years [of providing child care], we have finally put quality into the framework of the discourse," says Myung Lee, who ran the division of early care and education at ACS until early this year. "We're actually getting questions about quality from child care providers. Whatever happens with EarlyLearn, I hope that doesn't get away."

"EarlyLearn says, 'It's a new day. We must focus on and meet the needs of children,'" agrees CUNY's Sherry Cleary.

There is a great deal of work to be done quickly in order to strengthen the system for early care and education. The city must rationalize the relationship between the administration's vast new expansion of UPK and its inevitable impact on current child care and early education organizations and their workforce. It must also determine what trade-offs may be necessary to ensure enrollment and adequate funding. In the next section, we outline a series of recommendations that could help resolve some of these challenges. ✨



# Recommendations and Solutions

By establishing full-day, universal pre-kindergarten for New York City's 4-year-olds, Mayor Bill de Blasio has demonstrated a powerful commitment to early childhood education. His administration now has the opportunity to broaden that vision and strengthen the city's subsidized programs for early care and education serving the city's youngest residents, children aged 0 to 3. The following recommendations draw from scores of interviews and extensive research on the ACS EarlyLearn initiative. They include next steps that can be taken quickly with minimal resources, as well as larger goals that will require more time and investment.

Our key recommendation includes this single overarching point: If the EarlyLearn initiative's vision of quality and individualized, developmentally appropriate services is to be realized, there will have to be fundamental changes in the financial underpinnings of the program. The city's current investment in its nonprofit early care and education providers is proving insufficient to achieve the program's goals. The current upward pressures on teacher compensation and insurance costs only underscore this vulnerability. At the same time, the steadily rising cost of federally mandated child care vouchers has damaged the ACS budget and further weakened EarlyLearn.

Significantly, the original vision of EarlyLearn was supported almost universally in discussions we had with a broad range of interested stakeholders. Those interviewed applauded:

- EarlyLearn's focus on quality programming and improved child outcomes, starting with routine child assessments required for all programs, including family child care providers.
- The inclusion of family support services, such as the development of a "family plan" that builds on families' strengths and addresses challenges through referrals to appropriate community-based services.
- The extension of hours to eight or 10 daily, depending on the type of program, to better meet the needs of working parents.

When it issued new contracts in 2012, ACS moved to a rate-based fiscal structure to allow programs more flexibility in allocating resources and to promote parity throughout the system. (There had been significant inequities among providers under the previous expense-based contracts.) Nonetheless, most individuals we interviewed agreed that there was simply not enough funding allocated to support EarlyLearn's ambitious plans.

ACS developed EarlyLearn with specific fiscal guidelines that were intended to save government money, prevent waste and extend funding to as many families as possible. Prior to EarlyLearn, programs received full funding even when they were under-enrolled. Because the state reimburses the city based exclusively on attendance, the city was forced to absorb costs when programs had empty slots. In a 2008 needs assessment, ACS estimated that it spent approximately \$40 million each year on empty child care seats. EarlyLearn sought to change this practice and stretch dollars as far as possible. "We cannot continue to pay providers for consistently empty seats," says Myung Lee, former ACS deputy commissioner for early care and education. The new reimbursement structure, therefore, funds providers based on enrollment, not capacity, and also requires a 6.7 percent match from providers.

There have also been significant shifts in responsibility for health insurance, workers' compensation and liability insurance, sharply increasing expenses of the provider organizations. These collective changes, combined with what is widely described as a rate structure that is too low to support

competitive compensation for teachers and the ancillary family support and other services required under EarlyLearn, have undermined the reform's ambitious goals around quality. "The reimbursement rate is insufficient to cover a quality program. Everyone supports the EarlyLearn standards, but quality costs money," says Emily Miles, a policy analyst at the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies. "Between the low rates, what happened with health care and then liability insurance, programs are always waiting for the next shoe to drop."

Meanwhile, ACS has a structural budget deficit of close to \$90 million dollars, due almost entirely to an increase in the use and cost of child care vouchers. The city is mandated by state law to provide these vouchers to families receiving or transitioning off of cash assistance benefits. Between 1999 and 2013, the number of children using mandated vouchers rose by more than two-thirds, to nearly 57,000 kids. During the same period, federal and state funding for the child care system remained nearly flat.

At a City Council hearing in March 2014, newly appointed ACS Commissioner Gladys Carrión described the deficit as crippling to the agency's operations. "We stole from Peter to pay Paul," Carrión said. "We took money from other places in the agency that was unspent, and we quite frankly delayed hiring as much as we could to generate some accruals to be able to shift money around to meet those needs. You can't sustain that on an ongoing basis."

In fact, because the contracted EarlyLearn child care providers have been unable to maintain full capacity, the city has been able to divert some funding from them to cover the cost of the vouchers.

However, this savings is cut directly from the muscle of the EarlyLearn system: the contract early care and education providers that need to pay for teachers and staff; facilities; insurance; professional development; accountability and assessment; parent engagement and much more.

Now, with the city and state investing hundreds of millions of additional dollars in the expansion of UPK, the financially sound choice for many nonprofits is becoming more clear: Some of them feel compelled to open up new UPK classrooms rather than attempt to shore up the struggling EarlyLearn program for younger children.

This is far from a desired solution. However, there are a few alternatives:

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** City Hall and New York State could devote more funds to care and education for children aged 0 to 4.

City Hall could allocate new funds to improve staffing patterns at the nonprofit provider agencies, improve teacher pay and cover the additional expenses explicit in the EarlyLearn vision of quality. An additional annual investment of about \$2,000 per child in the system would cost between \$60 and \$80 million.

New York State could restore its investment in early childhood care and education. While city contributions have increased in past years, the allotment from the state has decreased since 2010-11. When federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds stopped flowing to states, New York State cut back on its commitment to early childhood education programs by \$82 million. Over time, this investment should increase so that the city and other jurisdictions can preserve slots and enhance the quality of early childhood care and education programs.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** City Hall and its agencies could begin to redirect existing funding to support EarlyLearn.

City Hall, ACS and the Human Resources Administration (HRA) could collaborate to steer substantially more recipients of mandated child care vouchers to EarlyLearn programs, promoting quality and shoring up these services. If public assistance recipients used their vouchers at EarlyLearn

programs, the city would effectively feed funds back into the subsidized system. Historically, however, the differing priorities of HRA (which distributes public assistance benefits) and ACS have hampered collaboration. “They have fundamentally different missions,” explains Melanie Hartzog, executive director of the Children’s Defense Fund in NYC and the former deputy commissioner for early care and education at ACS. Nonetheless, if the city’s commitment to supporting quality care and education is to be maintained, then vouchers cannot be allowed to siphon funding from EarlyLearn.

In 2013, ACS sent a mass mailing to public assistance recipients, to market the benefits of EarlyLearn programs. The administration also launched a pilot project in the Bronx, which allowed agencies to staff a table at an HRA job center, recruiting parents directly. Lutheran Social Services, which runs several EarlyLearn programs in the Bronx, reports that they have found this to be a successful approach and have steadily signed up voucher recipients for their programs.

A proactive, creative marketing and outreach effort not only in HRA offices, but via social media and in public spaces like subways and buses, libraries, WIC offices and homeless shelters would encourage voucher recipients to take advantage of EarlyLearn programs for their youngest children. The campaign could also help to promote these programs to others in the community.

**Action Steps:**

- HRA and ACS should give early childhood education program representatives the opportunity to meet with parents regularly at HRA job centers. ACS could provide an employee to staff the table, armed with information about specific, local EarlyLearn programs—especially those with low enrollment.
- City Hall, HRA and ACS should develop a social media and advertising campaign to educate voucher recipients about high-quality child care and guide them—and others—to enroll in EarlyLearn programs.
- HRA should distribute information marketing the benefits of EarlyLearn programs to all cash assistance recipients, at the time when their benefits applications are approved or renewed.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** It must be City Hall’s responsibility to prevent the ACS budget from being undermined by an unfunded and unpredictable mandate, such as the rising cost of child care vouchers.

City Hall should automatically increase the ACS budget when there is an unforeseen increase in the utilization or cost of mandated child care vouchers. A recent analysis by the Citizen’s Committee for Children points out that when other city agencies incur increased costs associated with mandatory services, the city’s Office of Management and Budget (OMB) conducts a re-estimate to ensure the agency’s budget can sustain the increased cost. For example, when the homeless shelter population increases, the Department of Homeless Services receives a budget re-estimate. The same happens for HRA with regard to public assistance and for ACS with foster care. If OMB were to take the same action for child care vouchers, it would go a long way towards stabilizing the city’s child care system and resolving ACS’s structural deficit.

**Action Step:**

- Because child care is mandated for those on public assistance or transitioning off, OMB should automatically adjust the ACS budget when there is a change in the utilization or cost of mandated child care vouchers.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:** As part of the shift to a broader early education strategy, City Hall and ACS should intervene to prevent the loss of experienced teachers to more highly paid UPK positions.

The pay and benefits packages for teachers in early childhood care and education programs must be improved. Teachers in EarlyLearn programs spend long days with children, with the expectation that they will nurture children's healthy development. However, the city funds early childhood education programs at a rate that ensures low salaries for teachers even as they have held high expectations for teacher qualifications. Unionized child care teachers have been working on an expired contract for several years and have not had a salary increase in nearly a decade. Because EarlyLearn requires that staff now pay into their health care plans, the take-home pay has declined.

EarlyLearn programs often support teachers in completing their certification, sometimes providing training in-house to help individuals pass the certification exam. Once teachers are certified, however, many apply to the Department of Education (DOE) where they can earn more money and significantly better benefits. Under the UPK expansion, teachers of 4-year-olds at community-based organizations will receive starting salaries comparable to those at public schools, but teachers of younger children, aged 0 to 3 will continue to be paid less unless a new wage agreement is reached.

The city should maintain its high standards for teacher qualifications as a key component of program quality, but these standards should be accompanied by a salary and benefits package more comparable to that provided by the DOE in order to attract and retain strong teachers. "We need to make a plan for certified teachers so that they want to stay in early education," says Ana Aguirre, executive director of United Community Centers, which has run day care programs in East New York, Brooklyn, since 1970.

**Action Step:**

- The administration should help negotiate a new collective bargaining agreement between programs and the unions. This agreement should offer teachers in EarlyLearn programs salaries and benefits that are comparable to the package for Department of Education teachers.

**RECOMMENDATION 5:** Enrollment must be maintained at a substantially higher level than it is today if the EarlyLearn system is to remain sustainable. Step one is to improve the city's centralized referral system.

ACS should update its centralized referral system, making it possible to inform families—in real time—about EarlyLearn programs in their neighborhoods, with current information on classroom openings. At present, the city has no centralized mechanism to guide parents to nearby, available, age-appropriate slots in subsidized child care programs. When families call 311, they are referred to the city's network of Child Care Resources and Referral Consortium (CCRRC) agencies, which have extensive knowledge about local resources and help parents understand the range of options available to them. However, these agencies have no way of knowing which programs have open slots, or for what ages those slots are appropriate.

ACS has made some effort to market EarlyLearn to income-eligible parents. In 2013, the administration ran an ad campaign in bus shelters and check-cashing locations and developed a texting feature to enable families to obtain additional information more easily. It also developed outreach materials and distributed them to EarlyLearn programs. Finally, ACS sent a mailing to more than 36,000 families living in public housing or receiving public assistance describing EarlyLearn programs. Unfortunately, these efforts have not solved the system's endemic problem of under-enrollment.

### Action Steps:

- The city should create a well-structured data system specifically for identifying where and when EarlyLearn seats are available, in real time. Unlike many other government social welfare data systems, this need not be held back by worries about privacy; while it would ideally receive data fed directly from the enrollment system, there is no need for children's names or other individual identifiers to be included in the interface. This system would be shared with HRA and the city's CCRRC agencies, as well as umbrella organizations such as United Neighborhood Houses or the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies. Database information should also be available to parents seeking childcare through 311 and ACS's EarlyLearn texting feature.
- The administration should support ACS in partnering with the MTA to market EarlyLearn on buses and trains serving neighborhoods where under-enrollment is a major concern.
- Programs with lagging enrollment should be given focused technical assistance in recruitment, including help using marketing materials. These programs could also have access to HRA job centers to reach voucher recipients. If lags remain over time, ACS will need to determine the reasons behind the low enrollment (including whether or not there is adequate neighborhood demand for those slots and if there are concerns about quality of programming) and take action as necessary.

### RECOMMENDATION 6: ACS should explore and implement ways to streamline the enrollment process for families seeking spots in EarlyLearn programs.

ACS should explore development of a facilitated enrollment system that simplifies the application and approvals certification process and enrolls families quickly. The current enrollment process is burdensome for families and programs, as well as for ACS. Parents must produce extensive documentation, including myriad pay stubs—in some cases six bi-weekly or 12 weekly consecutive and current stubs. Programs assist with eligibility verification by obtaining all the necessary documentation from families and preparing the complete application packet. The information is then sent to ACS for final approval. “There are a lot of things that need to be streamlined and integrated. At the end of the day, there is a lot of paperwork,” explains Melanie Hartzog of the Children's Defense Fund.

Once the paperwork has been delivered to ACS, the approval process is often slow. Program directors report they sometimes wait weeks or months to begin receiving payments for an eligible child. In order to avoid losing families, some programs allow children to participate in classrooms while they wait for ACS approval. Because there is no retroactive pay system, programs must absorb the cost of the child's care until approval goes through. Myung Lee, a former deputy commissioner for early care and education, counters that sometimes the packages received by the programs are incomplete and ACS staff needs additional information before they can formally approve families. This underlines the complexity of the overall application process.

Certification is complicated by state and federal rules governing eligibility. Yet many states have experimented with ways to streamline enrollment and re-certification for families. Some jurisdictions have combined applications for subsidized child care with those for other benefits (such as food stamps) so that parents don't have to fill out multiple forms that have overlapping information. Some places have made applications available at the offices of various public and private agencies so that parents can get help completing the form wherever it is most convenient for them. Finally, several states allow backdating the subsidy start date so that support can be paid retroactively once the subsidy has been approved.<sup>1</sup>

1. *Strategies to Support Child Care Subsidy Access and Retention: Ideas from Seven Midwestern States*, The Urban Institute, 2006, pp. 15-31.

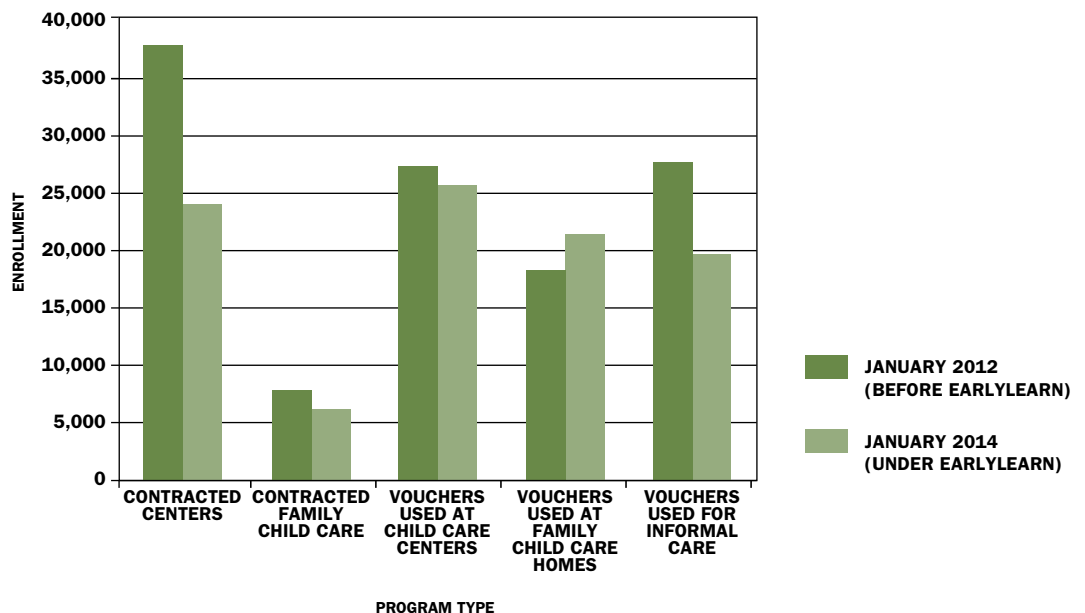
New York State has some history with alternative enrollment mechanisms through the Facilitated Enrollment Project, which helps families apply for child care vouchers. In New York City, the project is operated by the New York Union Child Care Coalition and administered by the Consortium for Worker Education in coordination with ACS. Parents who live or work in specific areas of the city are eligible, and the project currently supports 711 children, from infants up to 13-year olds.

Facilitated enrollment occurs at community locations, such as large job sites, and hours are flexible to accommodate people during their lunch breaks, in the evenings, and on some weekends. The project uses a condensed child care enrollment form (only two pages), and staff work closely with parents to obtain all the necessary documentation. For example, if a parent is missing a paycheck stub, staff can provide an income verification form for the employer to complete. Parents can also submit information by e-mail, fax, or mail. Once applications are ready, the project’s ACS liaison brings them to an ACS office to input the information into ACS’s computer system. One early study, conducted by the Empire Justice Center, showed that most families who went through the enrollment process were eligible to receive subsidized care within two weeks.<sup>2</sup> While the number of children served is small compared with the EarlyLearn system, the project offers valuable lessons about reaching parents where and when they are available and streamlining the steps to get families approved.

**Action Steps:**

- All documentation requirements should be assessed to determine whether aspects of the process can be simplified or dropped.
- ACS needs to find a way for final decisions on application packets to be made more quickly. A reasonable standard turnaround time (5-8 business days) should be established and monitored.
- The city should work with the state to establish the option of backdating subsidies for those families who are ultimately approved. Even a couple weeks of retroactive pay would be helpful for programs that have allowed children to attend while approval was pending.
- New York State currently requires ACS to certify families’ eligibility for subsidies before they attend programs that receive child care funding. Yet contracted providers for all Head Start

**HOW ENROLLMENT HAS CHANGED, BY PROGRAM TYPE**



2. Facilitated Enrollment Project Report, 2004, obtained from the Empire Justice Center website: <http://www.empirejustice.org/assets/pdf/issue-areas/child-care/nyucc-facilitated-enrolment.pdf>

programs have the authority to certify families' eligibility for those programs. The city should seek state permission for a pilot project to take ACS out of the final approval process and allow selected providers to certify families themselves in order to determine whether this would expedite the certification process without creating other problems.

**RECOMMENDATION 7:** To make programs more attractive to working families, the administration should work with New York State to create a new, more appropriate fee scale for parents.

For a family of three earning less than \$25,000 per year, the annual fee is nearly \$3,000—an amount that many child care providers and parents consider to be unrealistic. Some providers report they keep children in their programs regardless of whether or not the parents are able to keep up-to-date on fee payments, and cover the costs of forgone parent fees.

**Action Step:**

- The city and state should determine more reasonable co-payment for working parents and adjust the scale accordingly. ✱

**CHANGES IN ENROLLMENT BY PROGRAM TYPE AND AGE**

Citywide, the number of children enrolled in the city's core, subsidized child care programs declined significantly during the implementation of EarlyLearn. During its second year, the number of children enrolled in city-contracted EarlyLearn centers and family-based care both recovered somewhat, growing steadily as the year went by.

This table shows five categories of subsidized programs and the change in enrollment between January 2012 (before EarlyLearn) and January 2014, when the new program was at the mid-point of its second year. We compared January to January because there are seasonal differences in enrollment.

Two major changes occurred in the city's early care and education system after January 2012 that are not accounted for in this table: Following proposed budget cuts in spring 2012, the City Council restored funding for contracts to serve about 4,200 children, but these were not included in the EarlyLearn program so they do not show up in the contract lines on this table for 2014. Also, Head Start programs serving just over 5,000 children switched from city contracts to direct federal funding and oversight, so these, too, are not included in the 2014 numbers.

These two adjustments combined would account for about 9,200 children in the overall decline in contract care of 13,506, shown here.

Nonetheless, this table shows the substantial shifts in the system, including an overall decline in the use of vouchers for informal care with family, friends and neighbors, and a substantial decline in contract family-based child care across the board—but especially for children aged 3 and above.

	INFANTS AND TODDLERS 0-2 YEARS OLD *		PRE-SCHOOL 3-4 YEAR OLDS		5 YEAR OLDS		SCHOOL AGE 6 YEAR OLDS AND UP		TOTAL ALL AGES	
	JAN. 2012	JAN. 2014	JAN. 2012	JAN. 2014	JAN. 2012	JAN. 2014	JAN. 2012	JAN. 2014	JAN. 2012	JAN. 2014
CONTRACTED CENTERS	3,314	2,612	33,874	21,358	270	49	22	3	37,480	24,022
CONTRACTED FAMILY CHILD CARE	4,358	4,551	2,616	1,343	402	98	839	193	8,215	6,185
VOUCHERS CENTERS	4,543	3,951	6,992	6,887	28,40	2,758	12,212	12,338	26,587	25,934
VOUCHERS FAMILY CHILD CARE	6,908	6,913	4,157	4,787	1,535	1,951	5,784	7,706	18,384	21,357
VOUCHERS IINFORMAL CARE	6,133	4,247	3,324	2,488	2,199	1,595	16,052	11,371	27,708	19,701
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>25,256</b>	<b>22,274</b>	<b>50,963</b>	<b>36,863</b>	<b>7,246</b>	<b>6,451</b>	<b>34,909</b>	<b>31,611</b>	<b>118,374</b>	<b>97,199</b>
<b>% CHANGE SINCE JANUARY 2012</b>										
CONTRACTED CENTERS		-21.2%		-36.9%		-81.9%		-86.4%		-35.9%
CONTRACTED FAMILY CHILD CARE		4.4%		-48.7%		-75.6%		-77.0%		-24.7%
VOUCHERS CENTERS		-13.0%		-1.5%		-2.9%		1.0%		-2.5%
VOUCHERS FAMILY CHILD CARE		0.1%		15.2%		27.1%		33.2%		16.2%
VOUCHERS INFORMAL CARE		-30.8%		-25.2%		-27.5%		-29.2%		-28.9%
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>-11.8%</b>		<b>-27.7%</b>		<b>-11.0%</b>		<b>-9.4%</b>		<b>-17.9%</b>

SOURCE: ACS



*Program directors across the EarlyLearn system say their funding is far too low to make the vision real.*

## The Context: High Aspirations, Limited Funding

Can the vision of EarlyLearn overcome its financial limitations?

Last fall, a pipe burst in the reading room of the Cypress Hills Child Care Center. Water flooded the floor, ruining walls and the toddler-sized bookshelves that had, just a few weeks earlier, been labelled in bright marker with categories like “nature” and “fairy tales.” The program had to shut down until its site could be repaired and inspected—major blows to a budget that had already been battered in the transition to EarlyLearn.

Cypress Hills has been funded by the city to provide child care since 1991, when it opened a handful of classrooms for low-income preschoolers in the basement of a church in East New York, Brooklyn. Thanks to the recent recession and rising neighborhood housing costs, the families it serves have gotten poorer, says Maria Contreras-Collier, executive director of the center’s parent organization, Cypress Hills Child Care Corporation. Many live with two or three families in run-down apartments with too little heat and not enough food, Collier says. “These children are starting school with many strikes against them. Sometimes it doesn’t matter how much we can do, they don’t start the race in life at the same point as other children.”

Since the city converted to its EarlyLearn system two years ago, the Cypress Hills center has gotten poorer, too. Under EarlyLearn, programs are tasked with an indisputably laudable mission: to improve their quality of care, expanding services to prepare low-income kids for success in kindergarten and the years that come after. But program directors across the EarlyLearn system say their funding is far too low to make the vision real. “The rate is totally inadequate,” says Michael Zisser of University Settlement.

To understand the story of EarlyLearn, it’s useful to start with city’s annual budget book. Child care costs have ballooned over the past several years—not because of programs like the Cypress Hills center, which operate under municipal contracts, but because the city is mandated by federal law to provide child care vouchers to recipients of public assistance. Between 1999 and 2013, the number of children using those vouchers rose by more than two-thirds, to nearly 57,000 kids, with an additional 15,000 children using vouchers designated for low-income families not on public benefits. During the same period, federal child care money shrunk and state funding remained nearly flat. City tax levy dollars had to fill the gap.

Over the past decade, the voucher problem grew into a recurring structural deficit of close to \$90 million in ACS’s budget. At a City Council hearing in February 2014, newly appointed ACS Commissioner Gladys Carrion said that the deficit had a crippling effect on the agency’s operations. “We stole from Peter to pay Paul,” Carrion said. “We took money from other places in the agency that was unspent, and we quite frankly delayed hiring as much as we could to generate some accruals to be able to shift money around to meet those needs. You can’t sustain that on an ongoing basis.”

A primary goal of the EarlyLearn effort was to make the system as a whole more cost-efficient, staunching the flow of funds from the city budget. One approach taken by ACS has been to try to steer public assistance recipients into the city’s network of contracted programs, effectively routing voucher money back into the city-subsidized system. This strategy has met with only limited success,

in part because recipients of public assistance benefits need to get to work quickly, and the fastest child care option is often with a relative or neighbor rather than a center-based program or a formal family care network.

The city also sought to save money by changing the way contracted child care and early education providers are paid. In the past, the city paid providers according to their assigned capacity. Because the system was chronically under-enrolled, however, the city was on the hook for thousands of empty seats each year—none of which were reimbursed by the state or federal governments. Under the 2012 EarlyLearn contracts, the city promises to pay providers a daily rate per enrolled child, with the amount dependent on each program’s model, setting and the ages of the children served. In order to get the full contract allocation, a program must stay fully enrolled throughout the year—an expectation that many describe as woefully unrealistic. (See “Empty Seats,” page 28.)

Seen through a lens of fiscal integrity, government ought to pay only for services actually provided. Yet for the nonprofit organizations that manage child care services, the previous, longstanding method of payment for capacity (not actual enrollment) provided them with the assurance they considered necessary for long-term staffing and infrastructure commitments. Program directors say the new approach blew a hole in their budgets.

Among larger providers, the shortfalls have proven manageable. Most big nonprofits have staff supported by endowments, general support funding or other administrative fees, and they can devote some of their funded time to child care programs. Many have substantial grantwriting departments and volunteer coordinators. Traditionally, however, a majority of city-funded child care programs are sponsored by small community groups or churches whose boards have little experience writing grant proposals. “This part of the system had never been responsible for large-scale fundraising,” says Lisa Caswell, a senior policy analyst at the Day Care Council, a membership organization representing more than 100 nonprofit child care providers. “The boards were primarily focused on raising funds for special events, not for their operational budgets.”

During the second year of EarlyLearn, many of the city’s smallest programs say they have struggled just to keep their doors open. Some have missed payrolls or taken loans to cover their costs. Rather than devoting their resources to making classrooms better, directors often say they spend their days staving off financial disaster.

“I lose sleep over how I’m going to make ends meet,” Collier says. “You have a little flood and there’s no cushion to take care of it. It’s the definition of crazy.”

From the very start, EarlyLearn built in a requirement that provider organizations cover some of the cost of their early care and education programs, independent of their city contract funding. This cost-saving strategy makes programs responsible for raising funds or harnessing in-kind donations to cover nearly 7 percent of their budgets. The percentage is known officially as a “contractor contribution”; less officially as “the match.” According to officials at ACS, the match was intended to make sure providers were fully invested in keeping their programs viable. “The contractor contribution was not a new concept,” says Sara Vecchiotti, a former associate commissioner at ACS. “Preventive programs in child welfare have always had a match. It’s a way to engender community support to care for kids.”

A corollary goal was to incentivize programs to recruit some families that can afford to pay for their own care, to round out their classrooms. It is a strategy that not only strengthens program budgets, but also can create economically integrated classrooms, which have been demonstrated to have developmental benefits for low-income children. But providers say this is an unrealistic goal if their centers are located (as most EarlyLearn programs are) in the city’s poorest neighborhoods. “The parents we serve work in beauty salons,” says Ana Aguirre, the executive director of United Community Centers Inc. “They’re taxi drivers or chaperons on school buses. These are minimum-wage jobs.”

*“The parents we serve work in beauty salons. They’re taxi drivers or chaperons on school buses. These are minimum-wage jobs.”*

*continued on page 17*

## SUBSIDIZED CHILD CARE IN NEW YORK CITY

The city subsidizes child care through a combination of vouchers, which are provided directly to low-income families, and a large network of center-based and in-home child care providers, who hold contracts with the Administration for Children's Services.

### Eligibility

Under federal law, families receiving public assistance benefits are guaranteed access to subsidized child care in order to allow them to meet work participation requirements. Under state and city statute, any remaining city child care funds are allocated to parents who earn up to 275 percent of the federal poverty line and either: 1) have a child receiving protective or preventive child welfare services; 2) work 20 hours or more per week; or 3) attend an approved school or training program.

Low-income families pay a sliding-scale parent fee and must re-certify regularly—a process which can require extensive documentation and scrutiny. If a family's work or income status changes, children may lose their subsidies.

### Types of Care

The city subsidizes child care and early education in several ways. These include:

#### 1) ACS contracts with community-based providers:

- Through its **EarlyLearnNYC** program, ACS funds a network of child care and early education programs.

Under EarlyLearn contracts, **center-based programs** blend three types of care: **child care**, a city-funded program which is open to children whose families fall under 275 percent of the federal poverty line; **Head Start**, a federally funded program which serves children below the poverty line; and **universal pre-kindergarten (UPK)**, which is open to 4-year-olds regardless of family income. When the city expands its UPK system this fall, EarlyLearn programs serving 4-year-olds will receive increased funding in order to raise UPK teachers' salaries and meet new service requirements. (See "Universal Pre-K and the Future of EarlyLearn," page 48.)

ACS also has EarlyLearn contracts with **family child care networks**, which recruit providers to care for small groups of children, often in their own homes.

- Outside of its EarlyLearn system, ACS has contracts with 68 child care programs that were selected by the City Council (often referred to as **discretionary programs**). These organizations are not held to the same requirements (nor funded at the same rate) as EarlyLearn programs.

**2) ACS distributes child care vouchers** to families receiving public welfare benefits (as mandated by federal law), as well as a smaller number of low-income families who do not qualify for public benefits. The city has made attempts to market EarlyLearn programs to voucher recipients, but legally, parents may use these vouchers to pay for any child care arrangement they choose. Many vouchers support what's often known as **informal care**, i.e., a relative, friend or unlicensed care provider. Last year, the city distributed close to 57,000 child care vouchers to people receiving benefits, and another 15,000 to families earning less than 275 percent of the federal poverty level.

**3) The Department of Education oversees its own pre-kindergarten programs.** Some are in public schools; others operate under contracts with community-based organizations. The city plans to increase the number of seats in these programs by 25 percent over the next two years.

The city is also home to thousands of private child care and preschool programs, which are licensed by the city's health department and may accept vouchers, but otherwise have no formal funding from a city agency.

There are also currently 17 Head Start programs in New York City that receive money directly from the federal government.

*continued from page 15*

Last year, Aguirre surveyed parents in the neighborhood to see if they could afford the \$225 per week she would have to charge private-paying families. “A couple of answers came back: ‘Are you kidding me?’” Aguirre says.

According to ACS, fewer than 60 percent of EarlyLearn programs reported that they successfully raised the match last year. The agency says this number will increase significantly when providers submit their next audit documents, which will cover the period ending in the summer of 2013.

Another major cost-saving measure—and a major source of discontent over EarlyLearn—was the city’s decision to stop buying insurance for programs and their employees. Back in the 1980s, the city created a bulk buying scheme, known as the Central Insurance Program (CIP), to purchase health and business coverage for nonprofits running city-funded social service programs. Until 2012, the CIP provided high-end health benefits to employees of city-contracted child care and Head Start programs, at no cost to the providers or their staff. Workers paid no deductibles or co-payments and their families were fully covered.

By the time EarlyLearn came around, the policies had become impossibly expensive, says Melanie Hartzog, a former ACS deputy commissioner who was responsible for much of the planning of EarlyLearn. “We’re no different than anywhere else in the country. The cost of health care kept going up. It was necessary to figure out a better way to manage health care costs, whether EarlyLearn happened or not.”

In order to reduce insurance coverage, child care providers had to negotiate with DC1707, the union representing their employees. Officials who were privy to the negotiations say that, initially, the city had no intention of walking away from the CIP altogether, but the union wouldn’t budge. Individual child care programs—the workers’ direct employers—had little incentive to wrangle with the union, since the city ultimately paid the bill for program costs.

G.L. Tyler, political action director at DC1707, blames the ensuing standoff on what he describes as the city’s anti-union stance under the Bloomberg administration. “No union stands up and negotiates down for an employer,” says Tyler.

Eventually, the city ended these benefits and asked the nonprofit organizations and the union to find their own insurance on the open market—an endeavor that “turned out worse than anybody would have imagined,” says Marla Simpson, who directed the Mayor’s Office of Contract Services until 2012.

The insurance company that had covered child care workers under the city’s program refused to release the demographics of the pool of workers, says Lisa Caswell of the Day Care Council. Without the demographics, the nonprofits and the union were unable to get competing bids from other insurance agencies. “We ended up with the same provider, but a much more costly plan,” Caswell says.

Under the new plan, the nonprofits pay more than \$5,000 per year for each child care employee who opts to accept single-user insurance coverage, and nearly double that amount for those who need coverage for a spouse. The amounts are simply not feasible under providers’ contracts with ACS, says Michael Zisser of University Settlement. “The city made a terrible mistake on the health insurance. It upset everyone’s budget by 20 or 30 percent.”

In what sounded to many like an unpleasant echo of the health benefits debacle, ACS announced in November 2013 that the city would also be dropping programs’ liability and workers compensation insurance. ACS offered the nonprofits money to reimburse these new costs but, again, the organizations say the amount doesn’t cover the actual price of insurance plans. “It was ridiculously low,” Zisser says. “They didn’t talk to anyone about what this would actually cost. Given that they messed up the health insurance so badly, it’s unbelievable that they didn’t talk to anyone.”

*“We simply do not have the resources to deal with the contract system to the degree of quality that we want to.”*

In Cypress Hills, the decision to revoke business insurance seemed like one more in a long list of insults from ACS. “You never feel like it’s a partnership,” Collier says. “You always feel afraid to open one of their emails. What else are they going to hit you with?”

Financial insecurity has bred a great deal of resentment, not only toward the EarlyLearn program but toward the city. “We worry that managing so many financial challenges in this implementation has created fear and resentment on behalf of too many programs,” says Sherry Cleary, who directs the CUNY-based professional development institute for early childhood providers.

It doesn’t ease bruised feelings that the nonprofit staffers often feel the high expectations of EarlyLearn only work in one direction. Program directors report that they frequently reach full voicemail boxes when they call ACS with a question. The agency is often late on its own paperwork. Last year, ACS distributed audit guidelines to programs nearly half a year behind schedule. “If we had been six months late on something, we probably would have been defunded,” says Aguirre. “Everything is behind at ACS but we have to be in front.”

ACS officials acknowledge that the agency struggles to meet providers’ needs. As of December 2013, the Division of Early Care and Education had 69 staff members, managing a system of more than 300 independent contractors, says Myung Lee, who ran the division until early this year. “We simply do not have the resources to deal with the contract system to the degree of quality that we want to.”

But Lee also believes that much of the resentment toward EarlyLearn is a product of temporary resistance to change. “When you talk about a system that’s existed for 60 years, it’s going to be hard to get folks to do things differently,” Lee says. “Everything is new. The anger will die down. I think the ones that are saying ‘I hate EarlyLearn,’ that will die down.”

Others argue that it’s impossible to create a functional system on a dysfunctional budget. As long as the city’s early education system exists at the financial margins, says Cleary, “you will pretty much guarantee the quality of care for low-income children is low. You will pay people low wages. You will have poor materials and equipment. You will not have nutritious food. Then we have this staggering achievement gap and people keep saying how will we fix that? What are the answers?” ❁

# The Struggle to Improve Program Quality

EarlyLearn promised better care for kids. Two years in, the results are mixed.

Improving program quality is an inherently tricky proposition in a system that relies on hundreds of independent contractors. Throughout EarlyLearn's first two years of implementation, the nonprofit contractors' most critical challenge has been fulfilling the reform initiative's ambitious vision with its comparatively modest funding. Larger organizations that are rich on resources have had an easier time of it, supplementing EarlyLearn programs with money raised through private fundraising and drawing on staff, services, and other resources from other departments. At some of these organizations, EarlyLearn looks much as its creators intended, with some forging truly innovative work.

Other programs, however, have struggled to meet EarlyLearn's increased expectations and are unable to fulfill its vision. With many operating at a deficit and with staff stretched to cover multiple responsibilities, some organizations say privately that they have come to view the quality improvements heralded by EarlyLearn as burdensome mandates that are not funded, and are therefore less important than simply making sure children receive basic care and attention.

There are four key areas that define the quality improvement agenda in EarlyLearn, all of which are covered in the city contracts and include specific requirements for the nonprofit providers. These include:

- Tracking and documenting each child's growth and development,
- Engaging families,
- Tailoring professional development to meet each program's needs, and
- Using data to evaluate and improve program quality.

## CHILD ASSESSMENTS

ACS built EarlyLearn around a core tenet of early education: Children need great teachers who respond to their particular interests and needs. "In early childhood, it's not that you say, 'It's Tuesday, and the curriculum says we're going to learn about worms today,'" explains Cleary of the New York City Early Childhood Professional Development Institute at CUNY. "You learn about worms because it was raining last night and the children come in and say, 'There are worms on the sidewalk.' Then the teacher responds. Children learn best when things are relevant."

In an effort to raise and monitor the teaching quality throughout hundreds of city programs, EarlyLearn requires programs to meticulously document their work with children and assess child growth. The goal is to identify which children, classes, teachers and programs need extra help, and what kind.

In theory, at least, this level of information helps teachers customize lesson plans to meet children's particular needs; programs can customize professional development days to better suit their teaching staff's needs; and ultimately, ACS can use child assessments to know which programs need extra assistance, and what kind. But all of this documentation amounts to an enormous amount of paperwork, with much of it falling on teachers. EarlyLearn does not give teachers dedicated time

*Children  
need great  
teachers who  
can respond to  
their particular  
interests and  
needs.*



*“The teachers are saying they spend so much time trying to track, track, track, you can lose track of working with the children.”*

without students to complete mandated paperwork, and directors say they grapple with balancing teachers’ time in their classrooms with needing them to complete assessments and other paperwork. “The teachers are saying they spend so much time trying to track, track, track, you can lose track of working with the children,” says Marlene Bryan, educational director of an All My Children day care and nursery school in Queens. “It can be overwhelming.”

EarlyLearn asks programs to conduct two full screenings of each child a year, with teachers frequently conducting the behavior screening part, something that takes around 40 minutes for each child. All teachers must create monthly lesson plans using research-backed curricula, and perhaps the biggest change for teachers is the three growth assessments they must complete for each child, each year.

The online assessment tools commonly used in EarlyLearn require teachers to enter weekly observations of each child in the computer. Similar to how TurboTax organizes tax information, the assessment program guides teachers through a series of focused questions, helping them determine whether, say, Jenna holds her pencil more like a 2-year-old or like the 4-year-old she is, or if Will is still engaging in the “parallel play” typical of a 2-year-old or has begun to engage other kids. This generates a dizzying wealth of data and reports about each child and each classroom. ACS expects directors to regularly review these assessments with teachers and use this information to connect children with services and tailor activities and lessons to meet children where they’re at.

Child care workers have historically assumed a murky role somewhere between babysitter and educator. By encouraging them to think deeply and strategically about their work, completing child assessments places them squarely in the role of educator. “Assessment is really about getting to know the children that are in your classroom,” says Cleary. “EarlyLearn says, ‘It’s a new day. We must focus on and meet the needs of children.’”

Because lessons plans, assessments and behavior screenings are frequently completed by head teachers, it means that at many centers, the most highly educated teachers spend less time with children than they once did. Organizations try to find ways to make up for the time the teachers spend on assessments and other paperwork. Some have brought on volunteers or floater staff, or hired substitutes to step in. One Head Start program told us they encourage parents to help out. The quality of the substitutes and volunteers varies, and ultimately, says Sarah Maldonado, executive director of Bellevue-Educare Child Care Center, “If your head teacher is not there, quality goes down.”

Bellevue-Educare, which serves the children of Bellevue Hospital’s doctors alongside families referred through ACS, first opened in 1971. Some of its staff have been there almost as long. Like most child care programs, their pay is modest, at best. Maldonado, who has a doctoral degree, makes less than \$50,000 after working at the center for more than 40 years. She says she has always depended on staff who do the work because they enjoy it and are good at it. But the new paperwork makes the work less pleasant, she says. “Morale went down because there were so many requirements for the teachers in terms of all the paperwork,” she says. “There’s no joy now.” She lost all three of their head teachers in the last year and in July she will leave too. “It’s too much, we just can’t keep up with it, with no support system or anything,” she says.

Head Start has long required a large amount of documentation, including child growth assessments, and EarlyLearn programs that previously ran Head Start have thus experienced a smoother transition to EarlyLearn. But like elementary schools—which give teachers time to plan for class every day—Head Start programs previously had “prep time” built into each day. Before EarlyLearn, Head Start programs ran a shortened day, and teachers used the time when children were away for paperwork and planning. With EarlyLearn Head Start programs now running 10-hour days, many Head Start teachers have lost that time to plan.

As part of her doctoral dissertation, Asneth Council, director of the Police Athletic League’s child care and Head Start programs, studied burnout among Head Start teachers. The most common cause for



burnout at the two Head Start programs she looked at was the sheer volume of paperwork. Council sees how overwhelmed her staff has become since EarlyLearn began and worries that expecting teachers to take on the paperwork of Head Start without allotting prep time is a recipe for high turnover. “I don’t think they will ever get used to it,” she says.

Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, says it’s a question of finding the appropriate balance, and this must be figured out at the top of each organization. “The teacher needs to know how each kid is doing in order to individualize her teaching, but you need to balance the collection of data about how to teach with teaching,” he says. “It’s not getting rid of assessments, it’s figuring out the right balance.”

Brooklyn Kindergarten Society has found the sweet spot. After an initial adjustment period, teachers have come to appreciate the wealth of information the assessments provide. Takiema Bunche-Smith, the program’s vice president of education and outreach, says teachers now welcome the hour-long meetings where she sits down with teachers to discuss findings from the assessments and strategize next steps. “They were able to find out trends in their class, and see where everyone was falling on the continuum, and ask why is this child where they are and what can I do to support him?” says Bunche-Smith.

It’s not perfect, she says. The process is incredibly time consuming, and she says she has asked ACS repeatedly if the assessments could focus on areas where the children struggle instead of all 38 categories prescribed by the assessment tool. The request has not been approved.

Still, it’s working much as EarlyLearn intended. Bunche-Smith knows this is no fluke. Brooklyn Kindergarten Society differs from other EarlyLearn programs in key ways. For one, there’s Bunche-Smith’s job. She’s the head of an entire department devoted to working closely with teachers and helping them with paperwork, lesson plans and now, creating and making sense of their assessments. At many smaller child care programs, one director doubles as both program director and education director, juggling supervising classes with a million more mundane duties, like tending to enrollment or making sure the computer system is up and running.

Brooklyn Kindergarten Society also has a formidable fundraising arm, bringing in hundreds of thousands of dollars each year. Some of this private money is spent on hiring high-quality substitute teachers to step in while teachers are meeting and planning. Most significant, under EarlyLearn, Brooklyn Kindergarten Society has also begun paying teachers for extra time. “We pay them to have an extra hour a week of prep time because we knew they couldn’t do the extra work during the workday. If they need more time, it’s negotiable, it’s the director’s discretion,” she says, adding, “Not everyone has the funding to do that.”

## FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

EarlyLearn also expects early childhood programs to engage in cooperative, reciprocal relationships with families and link them to community resources. It’s an expectation new to EarlyLearn child care programs, which cater to working parents who are hard-pressed for time. But it is a longstanding mandate of Head Start, which expects programs to have full-time staff members dedicated to working with families and getting them involved in the program. In Head Start, says Cheryl Epperson, who oversees family-run child care at Sholom Day Care Inc., “the center is supposed to be available to provide families with what they need. It’s not just for that particular child who’s there. It’s there to cover the needs of the family as a whole.”

EarlyLearn attempts to embrace this philosophy, but it does not provide additional resources for providers to work with families, and it is not known how many programs are fulfilling this requirement. Directors say that expectations around family engagement services are often unclear. “We

*“Morale went down because there were so many requirements for the teachers in terms of all the paperwork... There’s no joy now.”*

*“I can’t be in  
the classroom  
to train or  
supervise  
teachers the way  
I really need to.”*

never had a piece of paper that said, “This is what your family worker should be doing,” one director told us. Many providers say they resort to doing whatever they can manage to meet this requirement.

Federal Head Start rules are explicit about how family engagement should happen, and ACS expects its Head Start programs to abide by these mandates: Centers must have parent advisory boards and dedicated family service workers. These workers act as liaisons between teachers and families, ideally speaking the parents’ first language and guiding families to set goals based on their needs—to take an English as a Second Language class, for instance, or attend a job training program. Family service workers make home visits, usually with teachers, and encourage parents to participate in the center, sharing traditions from their culture or helping out while a teacher does paperwork. Family workers might also communicate between the teacher and the family, discussing behavior issues or concerns about a child’s development. When parents feel welcomed and engaged in their children’s education early on, explains Epperson, they learn that they are an important part of their child’s education. “That parent is not going to sit back and allow anything that goes on at their child’s school to be unchallenged,” Epperson says.

Under EarlyLearn, ACS requires all programs to complete a family intake packet and create plans to follow up with service referrals. Head Start programs and some child care programs say they make home visits. Other child care programs laugh at the thought. “If that happens half my staff would leave,” Maldonado of Bellevue-Educare Child Care Center told us.

Large organizations are most able to provide families with assistance. Catholic Charities sends staff from its social service department to make home visits for all EarlyLearn families, including those enrolled through their family day care network. Frequently, the agency itself can provide whatever services a family may need. Similarly, Episcopal Social Services has used private fundraising efforts to beef up their child care programs to meet this and other requirements of EarlyLearn. Before EarlyLearn, the organization’s administrative child care staff consisted of two people: a director and a bookkeeper. Now, their larger sites have added a family service worker, a health service coordinator, an educational coordinator and a mental health consultant. EarlyLearn has spurred them to provide families with a richer array of services.

Other agencies have had the opposite experience, with some having to pare down their programs. Before EarlyLearn, Hamilton-Madison House, in Chinatown, had a robust team of seven bilingual family service workers for the 250 children enrolled in its Head Start programs. Now, the organization has just one for 190 children. “That completely changed drastically because our budget changed drastically. There are no lines for supporting staff,” says Jinny Zhong, a program director at Hamilton-Madison House. “That team got wiped out.” Teachers must fill the gap. “Aside from being teachers and teaching the kids, we have asked them to become social service workers,” says Zhong. “If the teacher is doing that, it is taking away from direct time with the kids.”

Some smaller child care programs with bare-bones staffing say they struggle just to find time to sit down with parents and fill out the intake form, which can take about an hour of questioning parents, sometimes longer if translation is needed. It can be challenging just to figure out who, on staff, will be the least taxed by this work. Like at Hamilton-Madison House, teachers sometimes help out. Other organizations rely on volunteers for the task.

In East New York, Cypress Hills Childcare Corporation’s Head Start program has a dedicated staff person for each of Head Start’s mandates, including a full-time family services worker. The program receives its funding from the federal government, bypassing the city altogether. At Cypress Hills’ EarlyLearn child care program, just down the block, the agency struggles to provide these same services, mandated by the city. “There’s no acknowledgment that you need staff people in order to do them,” says Maria Contreras-Collier at Cypress Hills, the organization’s executive director.

“I can’t be in the classroom to train or supervise teachers the way I really need to,” says Jerome Bass, who directs the program. “I’m hearing things [in the classroom] I know shouldn’t be going on, but I have to man the office, take care of parents. I’m dealing with enrollment.” With all he is expected to do, Bass worries about making promises to families that he may not have time to keep. “You have to do a lot of hand-holding. If a person’s family plan is leaving an abuser, or becoming proficient in English, the goal is that you’re going to make referrals and follow up,” he says. “Now this person is thinking I’m going to help them get them into a program. They want to know when I’m going to know, when I’m going to get back to them.”

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

At Lutheran Social Services (LSS), the City College of New York’s School of Education provides on-site professional development workshops to teachers and staff. At one workshop, teachers viewed slides of art from child care centers that developed the Reggio Approach to early learning in Northern Italy, “known all over the world for their amazing work in the arts,” says Beverly Falk, the education school’s director of programs in early childhood education. Reggio uses hands-on collaborative projects and engagement with the environment to foster creativity and a passion for learning. The teachers took these lessons into their classrooms, working with children to create collages made of acorns, stones, and other scavenged natural materials. Teachers brought photos of these collages to the next workshop, where the group reflected on making them, leading them, Falk says, “to a deeper level of work.”

Meaningful opportunities for teacher growth, like this one, are one of the key goals of EarlyLearn. The initiative increased the number of required professional development days from three to six days a year for family child care providers and from three to 12 days for center-based teachers. Organizations must provide staff with standard trainings on topics like being a mandated reporter of abuse and neglect, and infectious disease control. But beyond that, they may choose their own focus for trainings, with ACS expecting them to use information from child assessments and agencies’ annual self-assessments to inform the choice.

With its CUNY partnership, Lutheran Social Services did exactly this. When the agency completed its annual self-assessment, says Peter Anzalone, executive director for early childhood education, “We learned we had some weaknesses to work on that ranged from interactions with our parents to implementing differentiated learning.” The organization hired CUNY to provide professional development in full-day conferences led by early childhood education “coaches” at each of the agency’s 10 child care sites.

But this type of experiential, targeted professional development is not typical. Many EarlyLearn providers instead dedicate their trainings to helping staff get up to speed on basic program requirements, like how to enter child assessments into the computer or use a curriculum. It is not known how many programs are using professional development days to meaningfully improve program quality. Some directors say they lack the resources to provide training on anything but the basics: CPR, first aid, child abuse. “We don’t have any money in our training budget,” explains Desiree Jackson-Fryson, who oversees Dewitt Reformed Church’s Head Start program on the Lower East Side.

A few programs strapped for resources have shaped creative professional development workshops around the expertise they have available in-house. At Lincoln Square Neighborhood Center on the Upper West Side, the child care program’s volunteer social worker leads workshops focusing on areas she knows best. Teachers say they found her training on the emotional development of young children to be especially poignant.

Sholom Day Care in Queens enlists its certified, center-based teachers to help the agency’s family day care providers, who work out of their homes. To meet EarlyLearn’s new requirements for home-

*continued on page 25*

*A few programs strapped for resources have shaped creative professional development workshops around the expertise they have in-house.*

## Raising the Bar for a Few Programs

It can be very difficult to assess the quality of a child care program: Is the scuffle over a fireman's hat a sign of poor class management or the start of an impromptu lesson in sharing? Has the assistant teacher in the infant room stuck around 15 years because she adores babies or she can't find other work?

During the initial planning and rollout of EarlyLearn, ACS officials stressed the importance of carefully monitoring and improving early education program quality. They also talked about the need to share quality-related information with the public, frequently mentioning QUALITYstarsNY, a statewide rating and improvement system coordinated by CUNY's Professional Development Institute. QUALITYstarsNY sends specially trained consultants to observe programs in action. Its staff assess a program's learning environment, looking for many of the same things EarlyLearn requires, such as whether a program uses a standardized curriculum and is staffed with educated, experienced teachers. QUALITYstarsNY also looks at how effectively a program engages families and handles management issues, such as staff pay, benefits, and whether or not they have clear work expectations for employees. Like the stars system used to rate restaurants, it assigns programs a rating of 1 to 5 five stars, with 5 being the hallmark of a high-quality program.

*“If there's a program that needs a better curriculum, we will fund a consultant to come work with the directors and teachers to get there.”*

After rating a program, QUALITYstarsNY continues working with them. “If there's a teacher in a program in New York City and she needs three more courses to become a certified teacher, we will fund that,” says Sherry Cleary, executive director of the Professional Development Institute. “If there's a program that needs a better curriculum, we will fund a consultant to come work with the directors and teachers to get there.”

Takiema Bunche-Smith, vice president of education and outreach at the Brooklyn Kindergarten Society, says her teaching staff found the QUALITYstarsNY approach of coupling critique with resources to be more constructive than the annual self-assessment required by ACS, largely because it offers help with improvement.

“It's not just, ‘Rate yourself and you need to do more in this area,’” she explains.

Cleary says that when enough programs participate in QUALITYstarsNY, the program's rating system can provide funders and families with a much-needed window into the city's child care system, veering them toward the higher quality ones. “The end goal is that all funded children would only be in the very best programs,” she says.

But the program's costs are substantial, and so far only a few city programs have benefited from it—Cleary estimates it is about \$300 to \$400 per child, per year. This year, the City Council gave CUNY's Professional Development Institute \$1.2 million to support 75 programs that exist outside of the EarlyLearn system. Cleary hoped QUALITYstarsNY would also receive several million dollars in federal funding in 2013 to help support EarlyLearn programs, but that did not happen. Though ACS has incorporated its programming guidelines into the annual self-assessment tool, it remains to be seen whether QUALITYstarsNY will play a direct role in EarlyLearn. So far, only about 7 percent of sites in New York State (500 programs in all) participate in QUALITYstarsNY.

In the meantime, says Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, when it comes to child care nationwide, “If you're a minority kid your chances are 50-50 of being in poor quality care, and that's quality that is so bad that it would harm your development. So we have a serious problem.”

As many New York City programs continue to wait for the guidance and resources they need to improve program quality, parents are waiting for a way to know which programs might hurt their kids, and which will help them flourish. ✨

*continued from page 23*

based child care, many of the family providers need training in early education basics, such as the developmental milestones of young children, the importance of play, and the difference between cooperative and parallel play. These are concepts many child care providers intuitively understand, says Epperson, but to complete assessments they need to articulate them clearly. Bringing together staff from Sholom's centers and its family day cares is an unusual practice; at trainings, at least one certified teacher sits at each table of home-based providers.

Experts say that using in-house experts for professional development is a wise practice, as research around professional development demonstrates that one-shot workshops are far less effective than the kind of ongoing mentoring, coaching and relationship-building that staff members can provide one another. Whether teaching 2-year-olds or graduate students, "one of the strongest findings from education is that one-on-one tutoring is the most powerful educational approach," says Barnett of the National Institute for Early Education Research.

Falk at CUNY makes sure each subject presented by her education coaches spans two workshops, giving teachers the chance to test out lessons learned between sessions. Coaches return to programs to observe teachers in action and "to be another pair of eyes to support the teaching and learning ideas that have been raised at the different workshops," Falk says.

This kind of partnership is not free: Lutheran Social Services pays CUNY to provide the workshops and mentoring, and not many organizations have the funds to bring in outside experts to provide ongoing coaching. But agency leaders and Falk both say the results have been spectacular. Staff have been overheard discussing ideas from the workshops, and seemed much more engaged in the second workshop. Some have contacted Falk about getting their teaching certification—exactly what the agency had hoped for. "The idea is to develop a culture of learning inside your organization and engage in inquiry together that will further that learning," says Falk.

For Sara Vecchiotti, chief operating officer of Lutheran Social Services, it has another significance: During the heady planning days of EarlyLearn, Vecchiotti was as an associate commissioner at ACS. Now, when she sees the collaboration with CUNY in action, she thinks, "This is exactly what EarlyLearn is supposed to do."

## **EVALUATING QUALITY**

Under EarlyLearn, ACS has begun evaluating program quality to a degree that directors say they have not experienced before. In the past, the city's monitoring focused on issues of compliance with the physical space and administration, but today programs must provide extensive documentation of their day-to-day programming in order to gauge and impact program quality. "It is much more intense, much more focused," says Cordelia McNish, assistant executive director of early childhood services at Episcopal Social Services. "They are looking for very specific things, like in terms of class lesson planning, is it being tied to the assessments of the children? And how are you designing the lesson planning to meet the needs of the classroom?"

In the EarlyLearn vision, documentation and data are meant to guide instruction tailored to student needs; professional development days focused on staff needs; referrals to neighborhood services catered to family needs; and technical assistance from ACS to meet programs' needs.

ACS staff visit organizations at least four times a year to observe programs in action. The nonprofit agencies provide ACS with extensive data from their child screenings and assessments, as well as information about the staff's professional qualifications. Central to ACS monitoring is the lengthy and complex self-assessment that center-based programs and family care networks complete each year. This "all-encompassing assessment," as one director describes it, draws from a combination of basic factual information and classroom observation, frequently honing in on the emotional experiences of

*"The idea is to develop a culture of learning inside your organization and engage in inquiry together that will further that learning."*



*“ACS is looking for very specific things, like in terms of class lesson planning, is it being tied to the assessments of the children?”*

children. ACS asks the organizations to use information from the self-assessment along with ACS’s own observations from site visits to develop plans for program improvement.

The annual self-assessment is notable for another reason as well: its clarity of purpose. Throughout our months interviewing directors about EarlyLearn, many directors complained that the guidance they receive from ACS has been erratic and that they sometimes struggle to understand exactly what’s mandated by EarlyLearn and what’s merely an aspiration. “I think a lot of people feel in the dark because they don’t know what is expected of them until they get a flurry of emails saying, ‘Have you done so and so?’” one director told us. “I sat at a directors’ meeting at ACS where the woman sitting next to me put her head in her hands and said, ‘We aren’t doing that. I didn’t know we were supposed to do that.’”

The self-assessment, however, is different: The evaluation requirements are explained clearly and in writing. Programs get points depending on whether or not they are meeting ACS expectations, with extra points for going above and beyond—such as having retention rates for teaching staff above 80 percent, or giving young children at least 15 minutes of physical activity for every hour they are in care. EarlyLearn’s ambitious plan to raise quality can be found throughout the self-assessment. It is divided into three key parts:

- A section that looks at “process quality,” the term used to describe the interactions that go on in a classroom or family day care among staff, children, caretakers and the space itself. It evaluates the quality of classroom space and materials, such as what books are available to children, as well as schedules, such as how much time children have for running around. At least one study has found process quality to be more predictive of child outcomes than more objective measures such as the staff-to-child ratio, or the cost or type of care. Process quality is assessed using the researched-backed Environmental Rating Scale.
- A second section evaluates the quality of teacher and child interactions and the emotional experience of children in a particular classroom, using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), developed by the University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education. This observational tool hones in on three main areas that research suggests are linked to positive child development and achievement. These include the quality of emotional support and warmth provided by teachers, including whether teachers greet and smile at children when they arrive and provide comfort, reassurance and encouragement; the classroom’s organization, including whether learning centers are varied and inviting and the day’s routines predictable; and instructional support, such as whether teachers respond to children’s inquiries, follow their leads and make learning relevant to their lives.

ACS expects all programs to have certified CLASS program observers, which has been a hurdle for many providers, which must pay for a staff member to receive specialized training. ACS periodically provides CLASS training at a reduced rate, but many providers say that there have not been ample opportunities. Brooklyn Kindergarten Society flew several of its staff to Miami to become certified in CLASS, paying the full price—about \$850 a person—for the two-day training while also incurring the cost of travel.

Those that receive the training mostly say they find it invaluable. Episcopal Social Services trained all of its education directors in CLASS so that each knows which qualities to emphasize when training teaching staff. “It lets them know exactly what is expected of the teachers,” says McNish. Jackson-Fryson of the Dewitt Reformed Church Head Start program says CLASS taught her how to quickly size up the quality of teacher-child dynamics even when just peering into a room.

- The third section of the self-assessment looks at the “quality of administrative and other NYC EarlyLearn-relevant practices that are not included in the Environmental Rating Scale,” as ACS explains in its materials. This includes whether a program has implemented systems for engaging parents, screening children and connecting families to resources. This section relies less on observation than the others, and more on factual information. It draws from performance standards set by Head Start, the city’s Department of Education, and QUALITYstarsNY. (See “Raising the Bar for a Few Children,” page 24.)

Completing the self-assessment and the improvement plan is time-consuming. “It is a tremendous resource-suck because it is an onerous process,” says Bunche-Smith. “They often have meetings to explain the tool. Meetings are usually three hours long in the city. Then you have to understand it, think about it, provide documentation to show where you fall in different areas and then rate yourself, and you are supposed to be meeting all along with different constituents, different people on the assessment team.”

“It’s something that’s just unreal, the amount of time and effort that goes into it,” agrees Peter Anzalone, executive director for early childhood education at Lutheran Social Services. But Anzalone says that the payoff can be tremendous. “We see where our weaknesses are and where our strengths are. It is really interesting.”

Still, the stress and concern about inadequate resources plays a role here, too. Bunche-Smith compares the self-assessment to high-stakes testing in public schools. “If you are not giving people the staff to implement quality, then why are we doing the self-assessment? To say, ‘No, we don’t have that?’” she asks, before adding, “You can’t say you are going to judge quality without giving people the resources to maintain that quality.” \*

*“We see where our weaknesses are and where are strengths are. It is really interesting.”*



*In 2008, ACS estimated that it spent \$40 million per year on unused child care seats.*

## Empty Seats

Enrollment continues to lag under EarlyLearn.

Every year, thousands of publicly funded child care seats in New York City go empty and unused. As of June 2014, just 87 percent of the city's 37,000 EarlyLearn seats were full, according to data from the Administration for Children's Services (ACS).

The enrollment problem isn't new. Child care utilization rates plummeted nearly a decade ago, languishing at 80 to 85 percent of the system's capacity since 2007. In a 2008 needs analysis, ACS estimated that it spent \$40 million per year on unused child care seats.

When the city created EarlyLearn, one of the primary goals was to fix enrollment. ACS reallocated thousands of child care slots, closing programs in more affluent and gentrifying neighborhoods and opening them in places with higher concentrations of low-income kids. The new contracts aimed to make programs more attractive to working parents, requiring providers to offer longer hours and adhere to a higher set of quality standards.

Most significantly, under EarlyLearn, the city stopped paying child care centers for empty seats, creating a potent incentive for providers to market their programs and aggressively recruit kids. If they don't fill their slots, they lose some of their funding.

Almost two years into EarlyLearn, however, the enrollment efforts have not solved the problem. In January, there were more than 4,000 empty seats in the city's network of child care centers and well over 2,000 unused city slots at family child care programs operating in private homes. In an acknowledgement of the startup difficulties caused by the EarlyLearn turnover, the city paid programs for their first few months of operation as though they were fully enrolled, says Ana Aguirre, the executive director of United Community Centers, a child care program in East New York. Beginning in January 2013, programs lost money for their empty slots—leaving many short of their full funding allocation. Many providers, especially at small programs that depend on their ACS contracts to survive, say the missing money is destabilizing programs and diminishing the quality of services they are able to offer.

"Under-enrollment is a complicated story to tell," says Sara Vecchiotti, a former associate commissioner at ACS who was deeply involved in the planning of EarlyLearn.

Vecchiotti points to a tangle of factors that could offer partial explanations for under-enrollment, including the sliding-scale fees that parents are required to pay for their children's care. These can run as high as \$400 per month, for example, for a family of three earning \$30,000 per year. "Some people are able to find cheaper care," Vecchiotti says. "Then there's the quality of a program; the strength of the relationship it has with the community; competition from private child care providers. All those factors can exist at one place. There's no one-bullet answer."

ACS has tried to mass market its EarlyLearn system, advertising in places like bus stops and check-cashing stores, as well as mailing flyers to low-income parents that tout the benefits of EarlyLearn programs: consistent quality standards, increased oversight, tested curricula and so forth. But even when parents know about the EarlyLearn system, many find it cumbersome to navigate. In order to enroll in a program, families must provide a stack of paperwork documenting identification, work status and income—including, in many cases, several weeks of consecutive pay stubs.

Once all that's done, providers say that it can take ACS anywhere from two weeks to two months to approve a child for enrollment, during which time the provider risks losing the family. "There's always

a lady down the street who will take care of kids without any of this scrutiny,” says Jerome Bass, the program director of the Cypress Hills Child Care Center in East New York, Brooklyn.

“Parents ask ‘When can I bring my child?’ They want to hear ‘Monday,’” says Aguirre of United Community Services. “They don’t want to hear ‘When we hear from ACS, when the paperwork goes through.’”

From the perspective of the city budget, one way to address the enrollment problem would be to harness the vast (and vastly expensive) child care voucher system. Under federal law, families receiving public welfare benefits are automatically entitled to vouchers to help pay for their children’s care, which they’re required to use quickly in order to participate in work programs. The city spent nearly \$70 million last year to provide federally mandated child care vouchers, as well as \$5 million on vouchers for families who are low-income but don’t qualify for benefits.

When families use their vouchers at EarlyLearn child care programs, they funnel money back into the city-funded system—providing some relief to the overextended ACS budget. Under state law, however, parents can use the vouchers anywhere they choose, including to pay a family member or friend to provide care.

City officials say that, in order to compete with private providers and informal care arrangements—and especially to attract voucher recipients—EarlyLearn centers need to improve their recruitment strategies. In a 2013 City Council hearing, then-ACS Commissioner Ron Richter attributed the enrollment problem, in part, to “providers who are new to dealing with the eligibility requirements of either Head Start or Child Care, and to finding families. Others never did marketing or recruiting before.”

Melanie Hartzog, a former deputy commissioner at ACS and now executive director of Children’s Defense Fund NY, agrees that providers need to improve their marketing skills. “A certain level of turnover happens naturally,” she says. “You’re running a business. You need to have a family that’s waiting. If I were a program, I’d be looking at what happened last year and planning for this year. Do you have the right mix of kids, age-group wise? Did you plan for that appropriately?”

Many providers, however, say it’s unrealistic to expect programs to stay fully enrolled all the time. “It’s not possible to get every kid every day,” says Marla Simpson, a former city official who is now executive director of Brooklyn Community Services, which runs three EarlyLearn programs. Child care attendance is inherently volatile, dipping and rising through the year, Simpson explains. She suggests that the city should reduce its expectation, setting a lower enrollment threshold at which programs can receive their full budget allocations. “Call it 90 or 95 percent, whatever,” she says. “You need a system that creates very strong financial incentives to keep slots full. You don’t want an organization by its own inefficiency to deprive families [of child care slots]. But it can’t be 100 percent enrollment.”

“No one runs at 100 percent,” agrees Michael Zisser, the executive director of University Settlement, which operates four child care centers in Manhattan and Brooklyn. “No private program would budget for full enrollment.”

Myung Lee, ACS’s former deputy commissioner of child care and early education, acknowledges that it’s difficult to keep programs full. “It’s a challenge to get to 100 percent enrollment. The struggle is: Is it fair to pay a provider who consistently has empty seats? We’re stewards of tax dollars at the end of the day.”

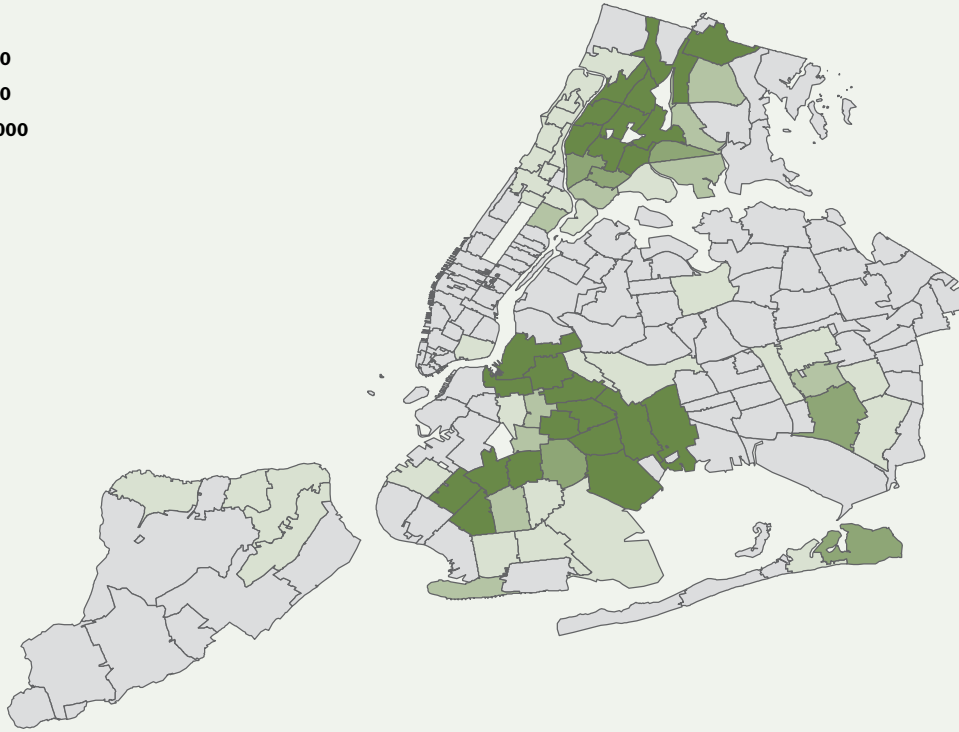
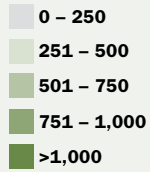
The goal, Lee says, is to make EarlyLearn programs so successful that the marketing essentially does itself. “In a few years I hope the concept of EarlyLearn becomes like the Pink Ribbon campaign. Providers will stick up an EarlyLearn sticker in the window and parents will know that means quality.” ❁

*“Parents ask  
‘When can I  
bring my child?’  
They want to  
hear ‘Monday.’  
They don’t want  
to hear ‘When  
we hear from  
ACS, when the  
paperwork goes  
through.’”*

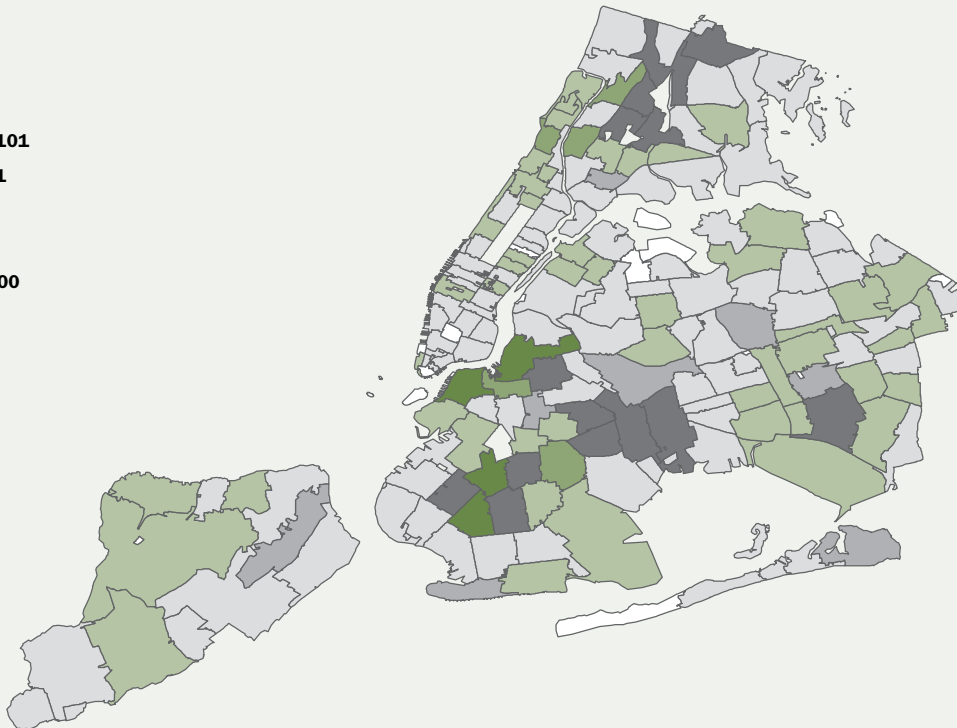
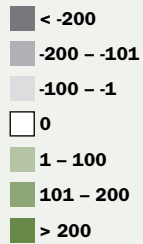
## TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN CITY-SUBSIDIZED CHILD CARE

The total number of children who are either using child care vouchers or enrolled in city-contracted programs has dropped in many high-need neighborhoods in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx, but has increased in Staten Island.

### JANUARY 2012 TOTAL ENROLLMENT BY ZIP CODE



### JANUARY 2014 CHANGE IN TOTAL ENROLLMENT BY ZIP CODE



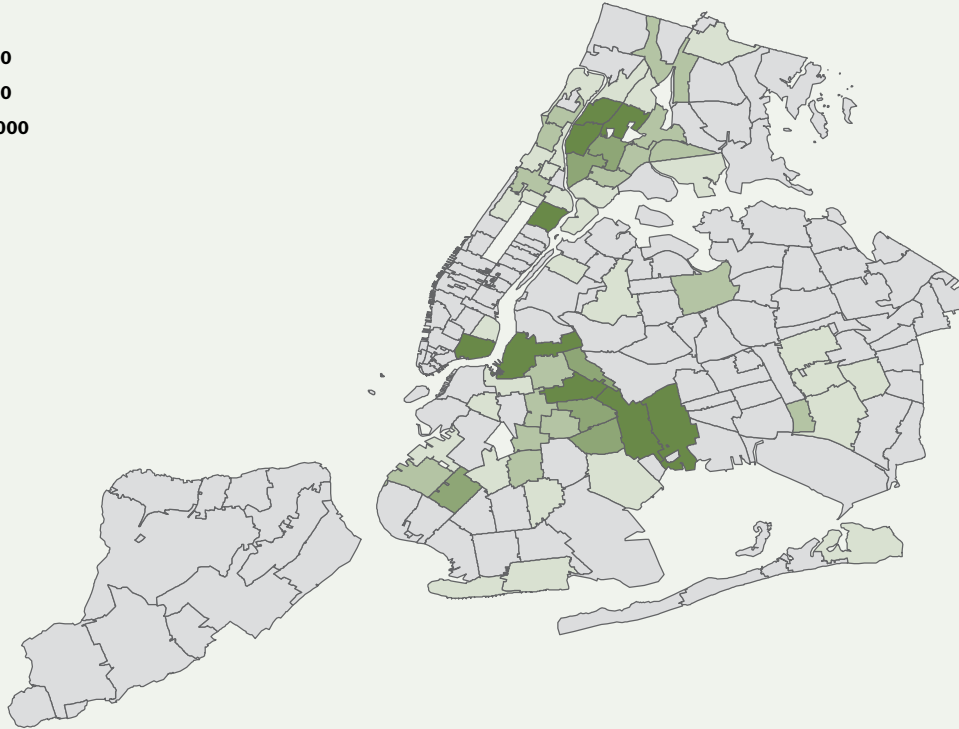
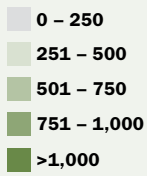
**DATA SOURCE:** ACS. Zip code boundaries are approximations based on 2010 Census Zip Code Tabulation Areas.

**NOTE:** January 2014 numbers do not include Head Start programs funded directly by the federal government or programs chosen by the City Council to provide care outside of the EarlyLearn system. These programs serve approximately 9,000 children.

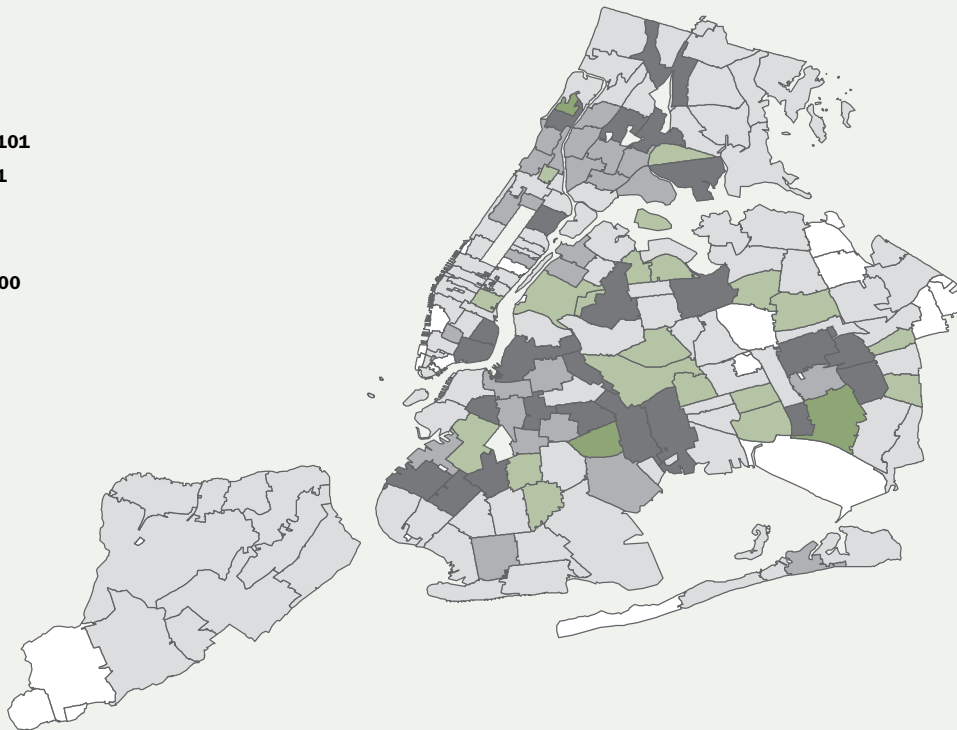
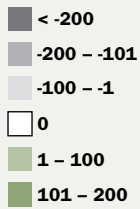
# TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN CITY-CONTRACTED CHILD CARE CENTERS AND FAMILY CHILD CARE HOMES

Enrollment throughout the city-contracted child care system dropped sharply after the launch of EarlyLearn.

## JANUARY 2012 TOTAL ENROLLMENT BY ZIP CODE



## JANUARY 2014 CHANGE IN TOTAL ENROLLMENT BY ZIP CODE



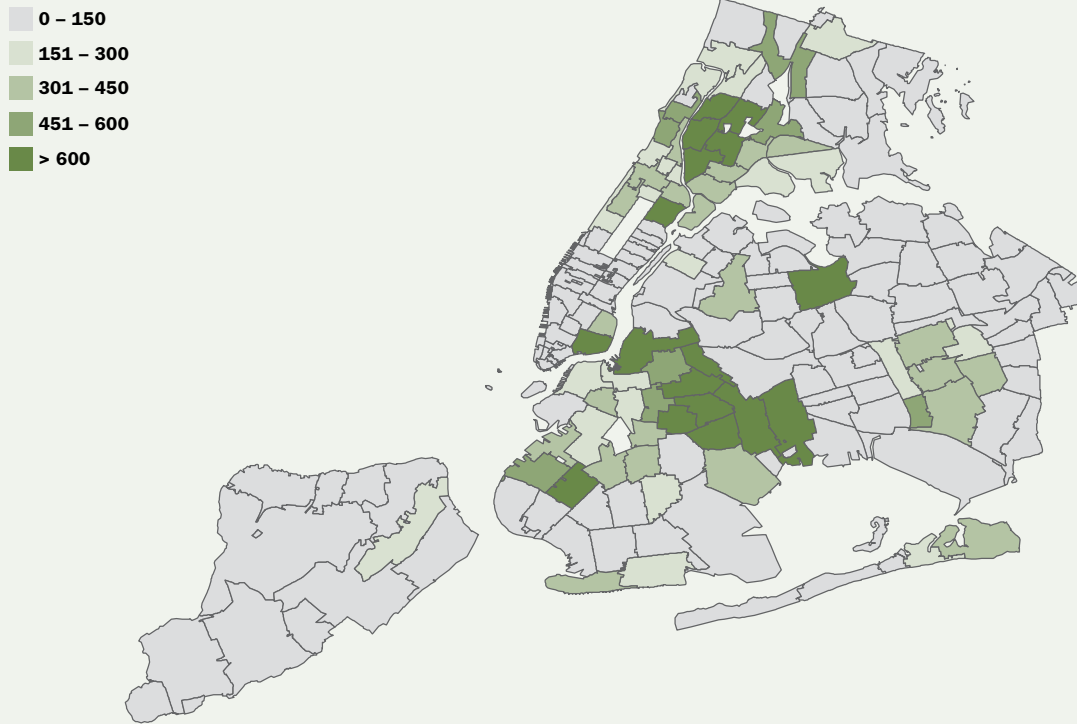
**DATA SOURCE:** ACS. Zip code boundaries are approximations based on 2010 Census Zip Code Tabulation Areas.

**NOTE:** January 2014 numbers do not include Head Start programs funded directly by the federal government or programs chosen by the City Council to provide care outside of the EarlyLearn system. These programs serve approximately 9,000 children.

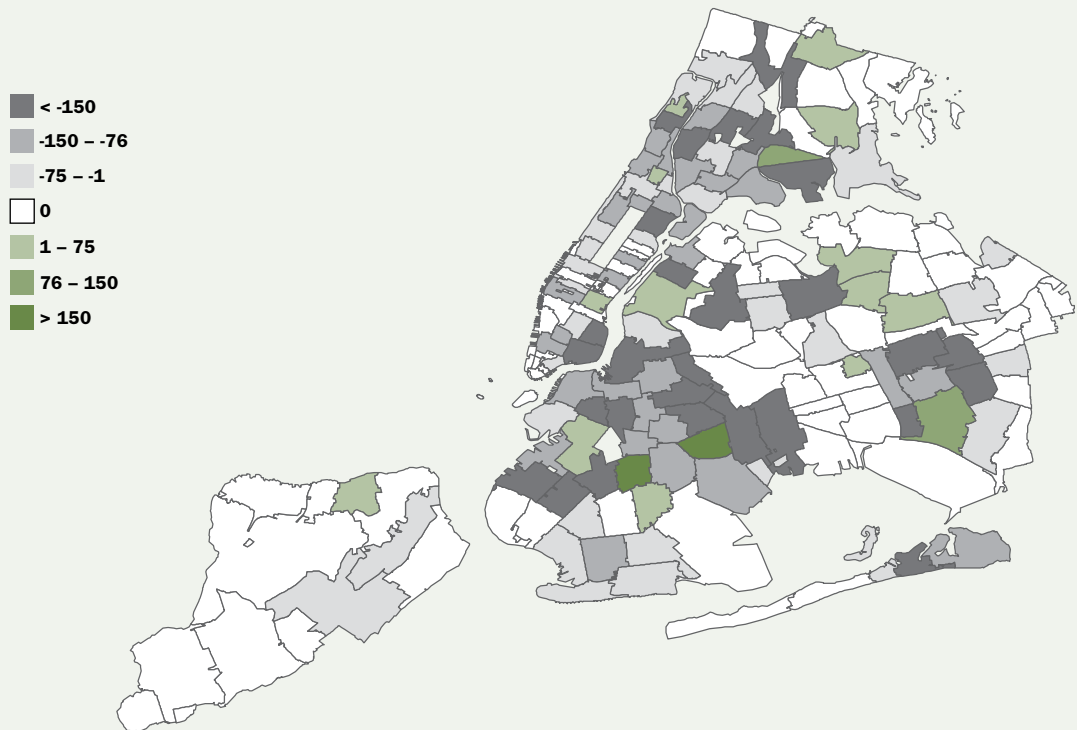
## NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN CITY-CONTRACTED CHILD CARE CENTERS

Enrollment in child care and Head Start centers with city contracts has dropped sharply in high-need areas of central Brooklyn and the Bronx.

### JANUARY 2012 TOTAL ENROLLMENT BY ZIP CODE



### JANUARY 2014 CHANGE IN TOTAL ENROLLMENT BY ZIP CODE



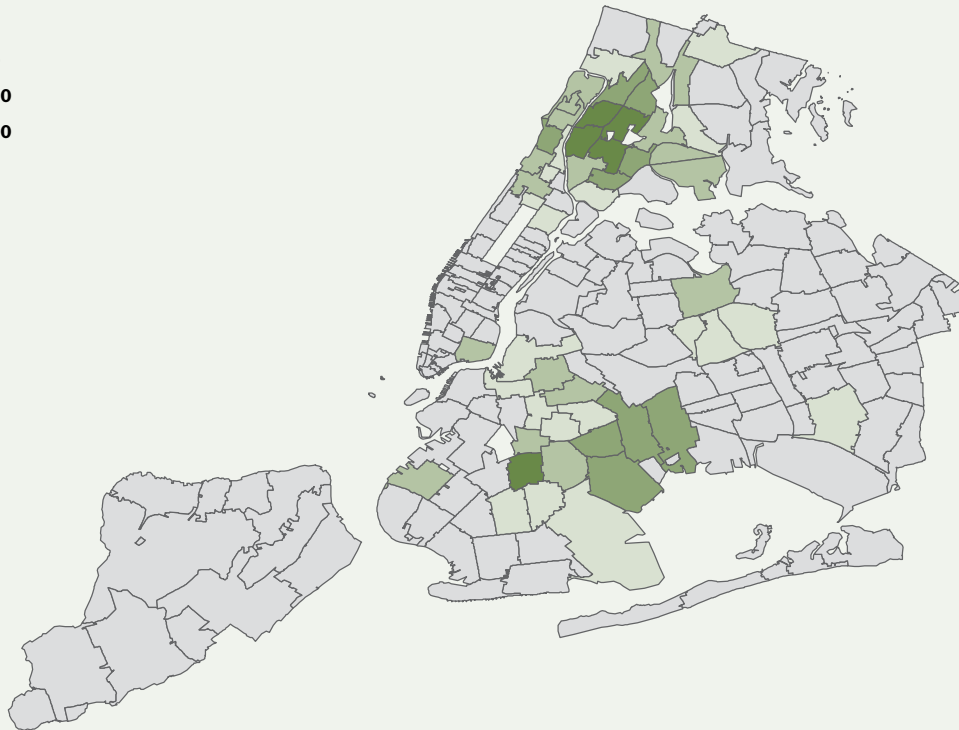
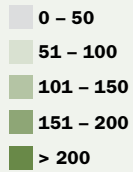
**DATA SOURCE:** ACS. Zip code boundaries are approximations based on 2010 Census Zip Code Tabulation Areas.

**NOTE:** January 2014 numbers do not include Head Start programs funded directly by the federal government or programs chosen by the City Council to provide care outside of the EarlyLearn system. These programs serve approximately 9,000 children.

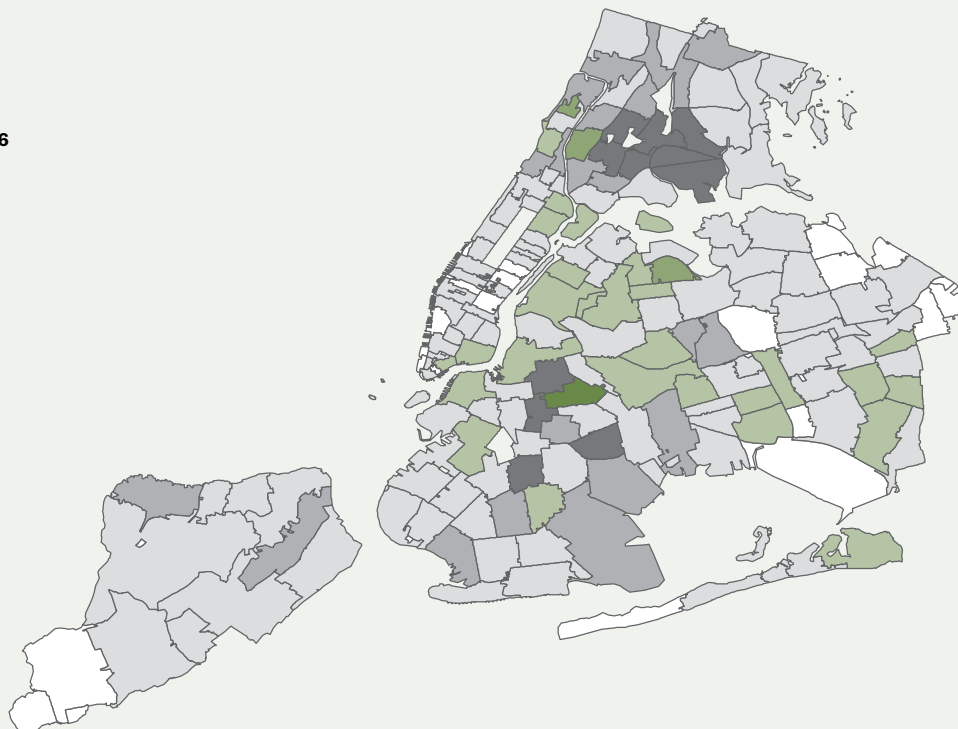
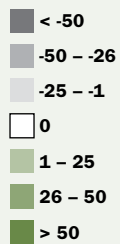
# NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN CITY-CONTRACTED FAMILY CHILD CARE HOMES

Enrollment in city-contracted family child care slots decreased citywide. The drop was sharpest in the Bronx.

## JANUARY 2012 TOTAL ENROLLMENT BY ZIP CODE



## JANUARY 2014 CHANGE IN TOTAL ENROLLMENT BY ZIP CODE



**DATA SOURCE:** ACS. Zip code boundaries are approximations based on 2010 Census Zip Code Tabulation Areas.

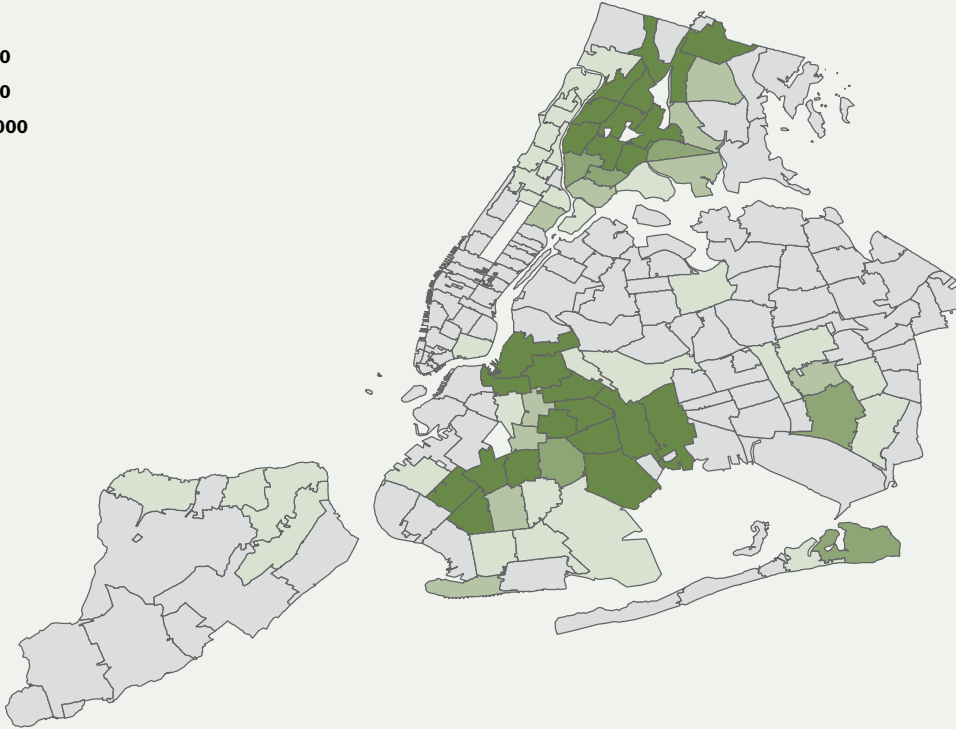
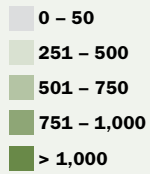
**NOTE:** January 2014 numbers do not include Head Start programs funded directly by the federal government or programs chosen by the City Council to provide care outside of the EarlyLearn system. These programs serve approximately 9,000 children.



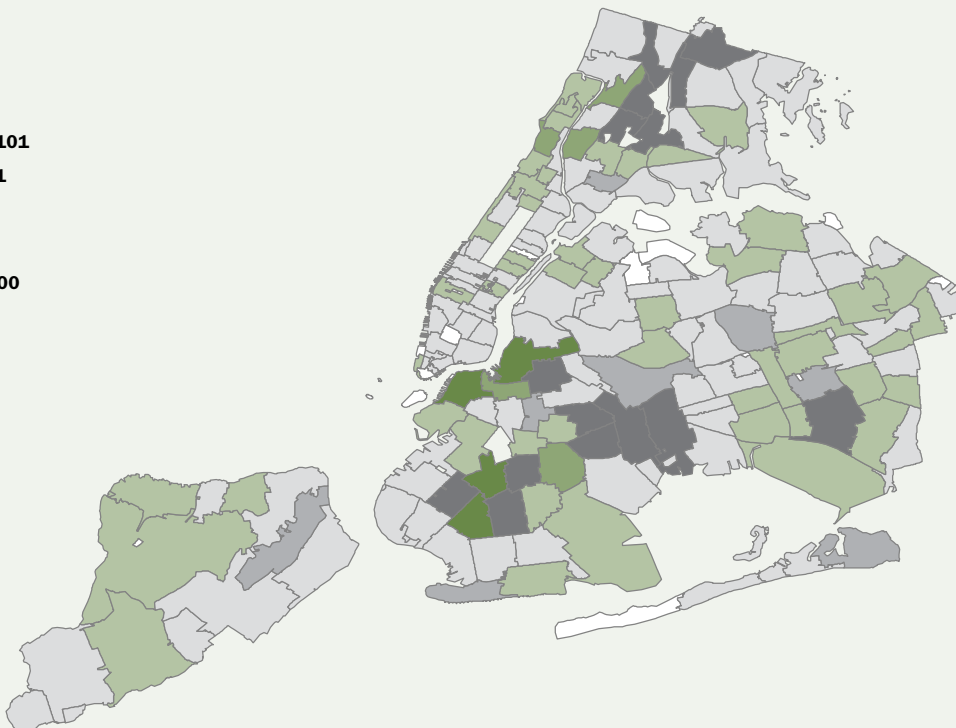
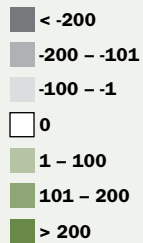
## NUMBER OF CHILDREN USING CHILD CARE AND AFTERSCHOOL VOUCHERS

The city distributes approximately 70,000 vouchers each year to help low-income families pay for daytime and afterschool care. More than 55,000 go to families receiving public cash assistance as mandated by federal law. The rest go to working families earning under 275 percent of the federal poverty level.

### JANUARY 2012 TOTAL ENROLLMENT BY ZIP CODE



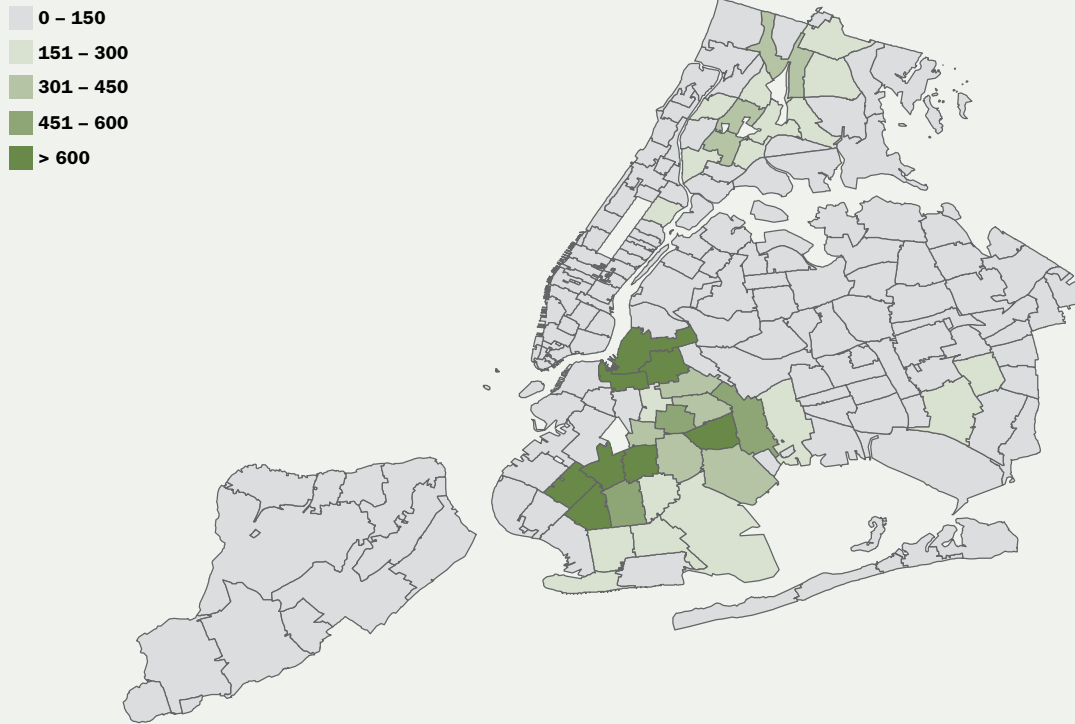
### JANUARY 2014 CHANGE IN TOTAL ENROLLMENT BY ZIP CODE



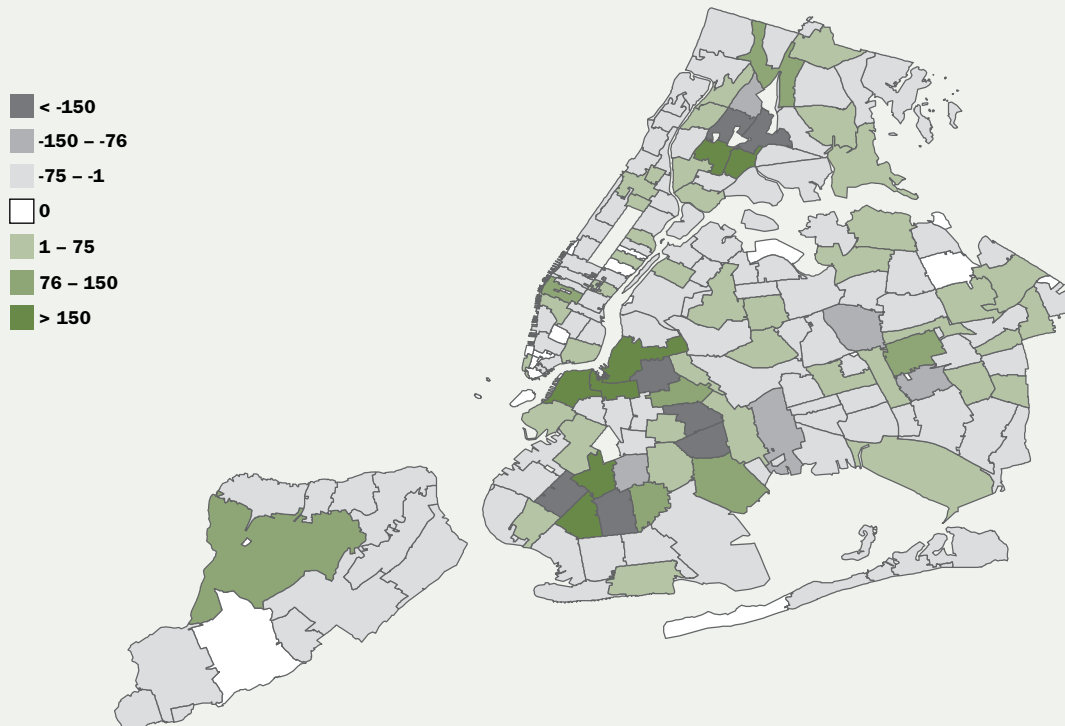
## NUMBER OF CHILDREN USING VOUCHERS IN CHILD CARE CENTERS

A growing number of voucher recipients have been choosing center-based care over family child care homes.

### JANUARY 2012 TOTAL ENROLLMENT BY ZIP CODE



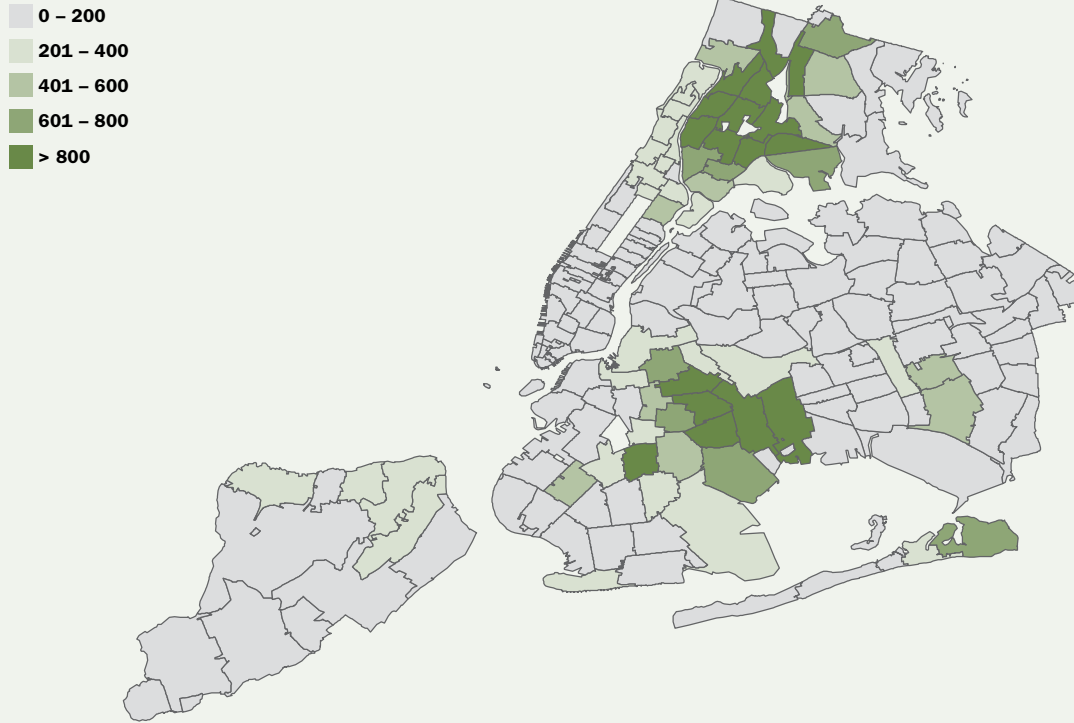
### JANUARY 2014 CHANGE IN TOTAL ENROLLMENT BY ZIP CODE



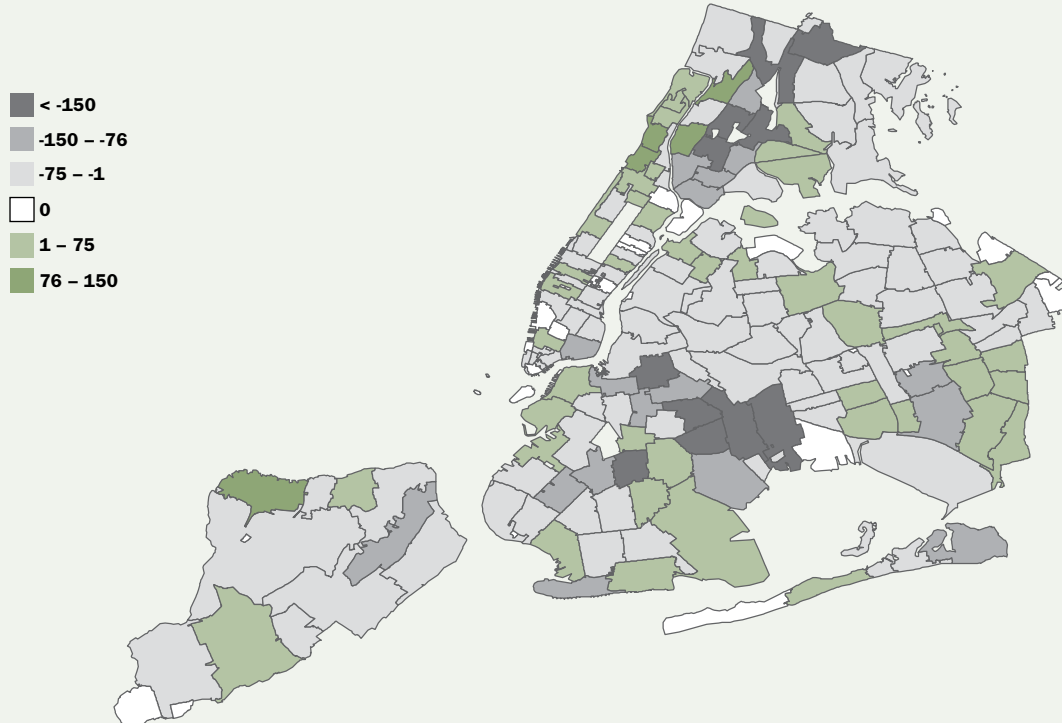
# NUMBER OF CHILDREN USING VOUCHERS IN FAMILY CHILD CARE HOMES

Use of vouchers in family child care homes has dropped in most parts of the city.

### JANUARY 2012 TOTAL ENROLLMENT BY ZIP CODE



### JANUARY 2014 CHANGE IN TOTAL ENROLLMENT BY ZIP CODE



## Can Small Programs Survive?

Dozens of small, neighborhood-based child care providers were wiped out in the transition to EarlyLearn.

One block from the western footprint of the Williamsburg Bridge in Manhattan, shadowed by the blocky monoliths of the Baruch and Gompers public housing towers, the Dewitt Reformed Church's Head Start program occupies the basement of a squat, brick building known to its congregants as "The little church with a big heart."

Since its founding in 1965, Dewitt and its members have borne witness to the endless reinvention of the Lower East Side: the razing of tenements and broken promises of urban renewal in the 1960s and 1970s; the calcification of poverty and the dereliction of the heroin and crack epidemics through the 1980s and 1990s; and—in the past 10 years or so—the oncoming march of glassy condos and trendy commissioned-graffiti storefronts. Through all the changes, Dewitt has kept its handful of classrooms open to the poorest kids in the neighborhood.

Unlike many of the city's social service sectors, subsidized child care has traditionally been a world run by homegrown neighborhood organizations, many operating one or two sites serving a few dozen kids. Their board members and employees often came from the community, and their sole funding from child care contracts with ACS. At Dewitt, as at many small child care programs, the front office (and some of the classrooms) are staffed by parents whose children once attended the program. It's common for former graduates to bring their own kids here to enroll.

"This is a big city. We make it smaller," says Reverend Leo Lewis, who has directed the Head Start program for all but its first three years. Recently past his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, Lewis has lived down the street from Dewitt since he moved from Jamaica as a teenager. He left only for a stint at Yale Divinity School, from which he returned with a conviction that a community's prospects for self-determination depend on the responsibility it takes for educating its children. "We have our own way of singing, dancing, talking," he says. "That should be reflected in how I'm taught, in how I move forward."

Because the organization is so deeply entangled in the roots of the neighborhood, it can meet children's needs in a way that a transplant couldn't or wouldn't, says Desiree Jackson-Fryson, Dewitt's assistant director. "When you concentrate your work in a small area, the benefits descend to the children. When you go large-scale, you lose that connection." Last year, one of Dewitt's preschoolers had surgery to treat a neurological condition. A teacher from the school went to his apartment every week to work with him one-on-one. When the mother of another student was bedridden, a Dewitt social worker—who was also a neighbor of the family—brought the child to and from school until the mom was better. "If that child was in a big agency or a public school," says Jackson-Fryson, "they'd have washed their hands."

Historically, small child care organizations survived because the city took care of their funding with contract renewals, in some cases, that continued for close to half a century. Many operated in buildings for which ACS held the lease. The city's Central Insurance Program provided a high-end benefits package that attracted teaching staff, despite small budgets and low salaries. Boards and directors were expected to know about children, but they didn't necessarily need to be experts at business management.

Much of this changed when the city introduced its new early education system, EarlyLearnNYC. For the first time, city-funded child care programs had to respond to a formal call for contract proposals—

*Because the organization is so deeply entangled in the roots of the neighborhood, it can meet children's needs in a way that a transplant couldn't or wouldn't.*

*Dozens of small, one- or two-site providers lost their child care funding.*

competing, in many cases, against agencies with dedicated grant writers. ACS's scoring process gave a 40 percent weight to organizational capacity, with just 20 percent for relevant experience. No weight was given to a provider's history serving a particular community.

From the beginning, many advocates and providers feared the contract renewals would wipe out small, community-based programs. "Great teachers don't necessarily make great grant writers," says Gregory Brender, an early education policy analyst at United Neighborhood Houses, an association of settlement houses. "And vice-versa. There are plenty of great grant writers who couldn't teach a classroom of 3-year-olds."

When the contract awards were announced, those fears were confirmed. Dozens of small, one- or two-site providers lost their child care funding. (See chart below.) Many medium-sized and larger organizations expanded, taking over program sites from providers who lost their contracts. The result was a massive contraction of the system, with the largest contracts granting agencies far more sites than had ever been awarded before. Some large agencies were given programs in neighborhoods—sometimes even boroughs—where they had no history of providing services.

"Everybody expected that we would end up with larger providers, but it was much more than we anticipated," says Betty Holcomb, director of policy at the Center for Children's Initiatives. "There was shock about how consolidated the grants were. Programs that had been rooted in the neighborhood for 40 or 50 years suddenly lost their headquarters."

Among the small child care sites that made it through the awards process, many are struggling to survive the demands of their contracts. Under EarlyLearn, child care providers are expected to offer a more intensive set of services, all of which cost staff time and money. They are also stuck with new business expenses, many of which used to be taken care of by the city. (See "The Context: High Aspirations, Limited Funding," page 14.) "There are a lot of new demands that haven't been partnered with more money," says Ana Aguirre, who directs United Community Services, a multi-service community organization in East New York, Brooklyn.

At larger organizations, there are ways to make up for the financial shortfalls of EarlyLearn. Fundraising staff and administrators can give off-budget time to child care programs; resources can be shared across sites; agencies can get discounts for buying in bulk.

### CHANGE IN PROGRAM SIZE

There are 60 percent fewer single-site providers under EarlyLearn.

	CENTER-BASED CHILD CARE PROGRAMS, JUNE 2012	HEAD START PROGRAMS, JUNE 2012
RATIO OF PROVIDERS TO PROGRAMS	<b>187/321</b>	<b>70/220</b>
1-SITE PROVIDERS	<b>131</b>	<b>20</b>
2-SITE PROVIDERS	<b>25</b>	<b>20</b>
LARGER PROVIDERS	<b>31</b>	<b>30</b>

	ALL EARLYLEARN PROGRAMS, JANUARY 2014
RATIO OF PROVIDERS TO PROGRAMS	<b>136/363</b>
1-SITE PROVIDERS	<b>60</b>
2-SITE PROVIDERS	<b>31</b>
LARGER PROVIDERS	<b>45</b>

At the smallest programs, many directors are struggling just to keep their doors open. “Every element of what was done makes it harder for the small providers to succeed,” says Marla Simpson, executive director of Brooklyn Community Services and former head of the city’s Office of Contract Services.

There’s a cost to wiping out these neighborhood programs, Simpson adds. “By removing those single-site centers, you’re eliminating this sense of ‘I’m just sending them to Mrs. Jones at the corner who knows everybody in this community and who’s taking care of my kids.’ There’s something that’s lost in that.”

At Dewitt Head Start, budget problems have forced Jackson-Fryson to close two classrooms and lay off 10 staff members. The program used to run buses to pick up students who lived in homeless shelters, but it had to cut the service months ago. At the end of last year, Dewitt took a loan from ACS to cover its payroll. The remaining staff have been left with too much responsibility, Jackson-Fryson says. Teachers spend more of their day doing paperwork; administrators are preoccupied with budget deficits, rather than supervising classrooms. Resources are spent staving off financial disaster, she says, rather than improving programs for kids.

Part of Dewitt’s problem is rooted in the changing demographics of its neighborhood. In previous years, the program had no problem recruiting families with incomes low enough to meet the Head Start eligibility requirements. “We always had a waiting list,” says Jackson-Fryson. But rents in the neighborhood have gone up—and so have the number of programs open to neighborhood kids, including new pre-kindergarten classrooms in two public schools.

Last year, Dewitt’s enrollment dropped below 70 percent. In the old child care system, that dip wouldn’t have hurt the program’s bottom line. Under EarlyLearn contracts, however, providers are reimbursed only for the number of children they have in their classrooms. If their enrollment numbers are low, so are their payments from ACS. Jackson-Fryson says the program’s family workers spend half their time looking for new families, but recruitment requires administrative capacity.

City officials say they had no intention, when they awarded EarlyLearn contracts, of shutting out small child care providers. “It wasn’t something we took into consideration. You didn’t get more points because you’re bigger or smaller,” says Myung Lee, who ran ACS’s Division of Child Care and Early Education until early this year. But the structure of the EarlyLearn system requires a certain level of business acumen, Lee says. “You’d be hard pressed to get me to say I don’t value small community organizations. Whether or not every small, community-based nonprofit knows how to run an organization is a different story.”

There’s an argument to be made that larger organizations are better equipped to provide the kind of high-quality, evidence-based programs that the city wants for its lowest-income children. The goal of EarlyLearn was to standardize and improve services—to establish mechanisms that measure not just whether programs are in compliance with fire safety exits and teacher-student ratios, but whether they are truly providing services that will help low-income children prepare for kindergarten and the years that follow. Part of the mission was to create a more professionalized field, with teachers who hold degrees in early education and directors who understand the business of running a nonprofit. Organizations are expected to track their work, generating data to demonstrate that their programs are following best practices and that children enrolled in them are thriving.

At University Settlement, a large, century-old multi-service agency headquartered on the Lower East Side, administrators have been able to patch holes in their EarlyLearn budget with general funds provided by private foundations, says Michael Zisser, the executive director. The agency runs a range of early childhood programs that enhance services at its EarlyLearn preschools. Programs sites share resources and supplemental staff like education specialists and mental health consultants. “The more you do that, the better you’re serving your families,” Zisser says.

*continued on page 45*



*“This was a job where you could have a good life, even though you made very little money.”*

## The Workforce: A Coming Exodus?

With UPK expansion, program directors fear they will lose their best teachers.

On a cold Thursday morning this winter, Lelieth Parkinson, a sturdily cheerful preschool teacher with glasses that peer from the end of her nose, began her day’s lesson plan with a conversation about snow. Between intermittent reminders to sit on their bottoms and raise their hands, her students—that day, a circle of 13 wriggly 3- and 4-year-olds—came to consensus on a number of points: Snow is cold. It’s wet. You can’t stay in it for very long (because you’ll get frozen solid), but your parents will probably forgive you if you throw it at them.

With the help of Miss Parkinson and a pad of butcher paper, they also identified “S” and “little t” words, noted the presence of more girls than boys, and agreed that the number 7 has more units than the number 6.

Parkinson started teaching just three years ago, having left an 18-year career as a bank administrator because she wanted to work with young children. “It’s a passion,” she says. “I really like what I’m doing and I put in a lot of effort.” She earned a master’s degree in education, a teaching credential from the state, and will soon hold a certification in special education. If she could afford to, she would stay where she is now, working in the city’s EarlyLearn system as a teacher at Dewitt Head Start, a 40-year-old program for very low-income preschoolers on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. “If I were to get a decent salary, I would prefer to stay at this level,” she says. “Children need qualified teachers at this age.”

Like many early childhood educators, however, Parkinson has applied for a job teaching in public school, where she can eventually earn twice as much as she can if she remains in the city’s subsidized early education system. Working for the Department of Education (DOE), a teacher with a master’s degree starts at more than \$50,000 per year and can end up earning more than \$100,000. In the community-based programs funded by the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) to care for the city’s poorest kids, a teacher with the same qualifications might start at less than \$40,000 with almost no prospect of an increase, no matter how long she sticks with the job or what new credentials she acquires.

Early Learn teachers are members of a different union than public school teachers, and their collective bargaining agreement reflects the fact that child care centers receive less funding than schools. Unlike schools, many community-based organizations use the moneys they receive to pay not only for teacher salaries, but also for rent and support staff, among other things.

Because of this, along with the city’s collective bargaining freeze in the latter years of the Bloomberg administration, city-funded early education teachers haven’t received a pay raise in nearly a decade. “I’m hanging in and hoping to get out of here,” Parkinson says.

Early care and education has always been low-paying work. In the past, however, jobs in the subsidized child care system came with attractive perks. Teachers had competitive vacation packages and health insurance benefits that covered them—and their families—with no premiums and low co-pays. “This was a job where you could have a good life, even though you made very little money,” says Lisa Caswell, a senior policy analyst at the Day Care Council. “The city invested in things like a pension system, health insurance, benefits. For people who believed in working with little kids, there was a possibility of having a career.”

In 2012, when ACS converted the child care system to EarlyLearn, many of those perks disappeared. Teachers and other staff lost sick days, vacation days and holidays. Depending on the union local

they belong to, teachers continue to be paid as either Head Start teachers or child care teachers—with Head Start teachers making far more money than child care teachers—even though they are all doing the same job. All teachers are now expected to create more customized lesson plans and documenting regular student evaluations, but they don't get more time to plan their day or complete the new paperwork. "A lot of the criteria are just increasing, increasing, increasing, but the salaries as well as the incentives are not," says Jinny Zhong, a program director at Hamilton-Madison House, a Lower East Side settlement house with several early childhood programs.

Harshest of all, the city dropped its centralized insurance program, leaving it to EarlyLearn administrators and the child care employees' union, DC 1707 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, to find and purchase new benefits—a process that is widely considered to have been a disaster (See: "The Context: High Aspirations, Limited Funding," p.14.)

Under their new plan, child care workers and teachers pay \$80 per month in insurance premiums (or \$160 to cover a spouse). In return, they get a plan that requires a \$50 copay for doctors' visits and \$50 deductibles for prescription drugs.

According to testimony at a 2013 City Council hearing by union officials, 60 percent of the EarlyLearn workforce opted to refuse the new health coverage, most of them among the system's lowest-paid workers: teachers' assistants, cooks and custodians. For those who opted in, the premiums amount to a pay cut. "I have teachers telling me they need to go to the doctor but they can't afford the co-pay," says Maria Contreras-Collier, director of Cypress Hills Childcare Corporation, which runs an EarlyLearn preschool in Brooklyn. "A large number of our employees are single women head of household who truly live on a shoestring budget and cannot incorporate the expense," she adds. "As a director, it's a terrible feeling. I've worked with some of them for 18 years. I know their families. I know their kids. You feel like you're betraying them."

Ana Aguirre, the director of United Community Centers, a 40-year-old day care in East New York, says that she watches her teachers struggle with the same problems as the low-income parents they serve. Last year, one of her head teachers came close to quitting because she couldn't afford her own son's child care. "Now she has some crazy arrangement. The sister takes him one day; the sister-in-law the next. We had to change her schedule to accommodate it," Aguirre says. "These are people with degrees who have been working for 10, 20 years. It's a joke how they are treated."

When the system incentivizes turnover, it hurts children in their classrooms, says Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University. "The first year or two is when teachers are at their absolute worst. It's a very clear finding in education."

With the upcoming expansion of universal pre-kindergarten programs for 4-year-olds, certified early childhood teachers will soon find they have more opportunities to move up from poorly paid jobs. New York City plans to open 2,000 new UPK classrooms by September 2015, each of which will need a teacher who knows how to work with very young children (See "Universal Pre-K and the Future of EarlyLearn," page 48.)

Many of the new classrooms will be in public schools, where teachers will be paid at the same rates, with the same opportunities for raises, as other DOE teachers. The majority will be run by community-based organizations under contract with the DOE, including many current EarlyLearn providers who now run part-day UPK programs. For the first time, all teachers of 4-year-olds in these community-based programs will start at salaries comparable to their public-school counterparts.

G.L. Tyler, political action director at the union representing child care workers, says that if the salaries of child care teachers aren't raised, it could leave a dangerous hole in the city's subsidized programs for younger children. "Workers who have the same qualification, whether they are teachers of 2-year-olds, 3-year-olds, or 4-year-olds should have parity within the system," says Tyler. "I don't think workers who teach 2- or 3-year olds need to be punished."

*"I have teachers telling me they need to go to the doctor but they can't afford the co-pay."*

If the best, most qualified teachers can raise their salaries by moving to UPK classrooms, who will teach the city's low-income toddlers? "It's been an employer's market, but everything in life is cyclical," says Collier. "Things will change and there will be a mass exodus. I feel there's going to be a real brain drain in this area because we're not doing much to keep them, to make it a career where people can earn a living."

Beverly Falk, program director at the City College of New York's School of Education, agrees. "Early childhood teachers are the lowest paid of the teachers everywhere," Falk says. "When all the research says it's the most critical time to construct the architecture for the brain, for an individual's entire rest of their life, it would make sense to give teachers a competitive salary ... You can make more money walking a dog than being an early childhood teacher. What does that say about our values in society?" ✿

## Higher Standards for Teachers

In 2007, the NYC Early Childhood Professional Development Institute at CUNY found that more than 43 percent of teachers in the New York City subsidized child care system lacked a teaching certification.

At that time, under the city's longstanding early care and education contracts, preschool teachers were technically required to hold qualifications (a degree in early education and a state license for head teachers; a Child Development Associate, or CDA, for assistant teachers) but many were on study plans that allowed them to work while they earned credits over an indefinite period of time.

This was supposed to change with EarlyLearn. When ACS issued new contracts, it made clear to its contractors that early childhood teachers must get credentialed or be replaced.

Jim Matison, executive director of Brooklyn Kindergarten Society, says that it's possible for early childhood providers to staff their programs with qualified teachers, but it requires a philosophical shift. When Matison took charge of the organization, which runs five EarlyLearn child care centers in Bedford Stuyvesant and Crown Heights, he increased his state-certified staff from one teacher to 10. "We did not say, 'Who do we know? Who's in the neighborhood? Who's good with children?' We said, 'Who are the most qualified teachers that we can bring in here?'"

Sherry Cleary, executive director of the CUNY Professional Development Institute, agrees that teachers and programs can be held to higher standards. "We need to flood the field with qualified, credentialed teachers," she says. "Then we could make a strong case for higher salaries for people in early childhood. If you don't meet the criteria for your job, it's hard to argue for parity with public school teachers."

But many directors argue it is unreasonable to make new demands of teachers without offering them something in return. "I do feel children will benefit when teaching staff are better equipped, but you're asking people with very low salaries to go back to school when even CUNY schools are very expensive," says Maria Contreras-Collier of the Cypress Hills Child Care Corporation in East New York, Brooklyn.

Getting certified requires a master's degree and a series of licensing exams costing around \$80 each. A number of Cypress Hills teachers have tried to earn their degrees at night, but it's a chaotic endeavor, says Contreras-Collier. "You live in Brooklyn and you work until six. Maybe you'll get lucky and find a class from 8pm to 10pm, but then you have to get back and take care of your family and work the next day. I compare it to a time when they said 'Just say no to drugs.' Now it's 'Go to school. Figure it out.'"

Teachers who do make it to school soon hit another barrier: The student teaching necessary for certification requires that they work with two different age groups. Typically, this means they must teach at a different site from the one where they normally work, meaning their employers must release them for that time.

When teachers do get credentialed, programs often lose them to the Department of Education. At United Community Services, Ana Aguirre says she does everything she can to help teachers go to school: She arranges their schedules around classes and work-study requirements, brings experts to offer workshops for teachers onsite, and pays for teachers to take their qualifying exams. "But when they pass, they go to the Board of Ed," Aguirre says. "I can't blame them. They have student loans and families to support. We can't compete." ✿

## Infants and Toddlers

EarlyLearn struggles to raise standards in home-based day care.

Infants and toddlers have long been an underserved group in New York City, with the city's subsidized child care system being no exception. In the 2005 ACS strategic plan that laid the groundwork for EarlyLearn, the agency reported that a New York City 4-year-old is nearly 10 times more likely to receive early care and education services than a 1-year-old. This was not for lack of demand. Over two-thirds of surveyed, qualified families who wished their children were in care had children who were 2 years old or younger.

Research on neural development suggests that child care for very young children is not enough, by itself. Care for babies and toddlers should be of particularly high quality, experts say, as brain development is most rapid and pronounced during a child's first three years. Providing center-based child care for this age group is costly, requiring programs to have dedicated rooms with fire sprinklers and a relatively low staff-to-child ratio. Few centers provide infant care, and infants and toddlers are more commonly looked after in family home-based child care—small programs typically offered in a provider's own home.

Under EarlyLearn, ACS sought to dramatically expand early care slots for children under 3 in these home-based settings. So far, it hasn't happened. The networks of contracted, licensed, home-based providers are caring for about 25 percent fewer children than before EarlyLearn began. The number of infants and toddlers in contracted, home-based care has barely budged, rising from 4,358 children in January 2012 to 4,551 in January 2014.

In other words, the home-based family day care system is caring for far fewer children aged 3 and up than in the past, and about the same number of infants and toddlers. There were about 2,400 empty, available slots in the contracted programs as of January 2014, according to ACS data. The licensed, home-based child care system was operating at only 72 percent of its capacity.

With EarlyLearn, ACS has also attempted to raise the quality standard for home-based care, asking providers to give care that is not merely custodial or loving, but also educational. Now, like teachers at child care centers, providers of licensed, home-based businesses must follow standardized curriculum, create developmentally appropriate lesson plans, and assess and document children's skills and development. EarlyLearn also expects family providers to attend six professional development days each year, connect families to local services and resources, and screen children in their home for developmental delays. These are sea changes

for home-based caretakers, whose training and monitoring has historically focused on health and safety requirements. The organizations ACS contracts with to oversee and manage these licensed homes say that many providers do not have the expertise required to operate the way EarlyLearn expects, and that they are struggling to get up to speed.

Child care provided in family homes has always been an important part of the early childhood system. It is less expensive than center-based care, and some families prefer home-based, family-operated programs, believing their children will receive more personalized attention in the homey, smaller settings. Also, family homes can be very convenient. Family providers frequently live close by and can often be flexible with a family's changing schedule—staying late or opening early. Families may feel comfortable keeping kids in their own neighborhoods and communities, sometimes choosing caretakers with the same cultural background and similar parenting styles as their own. They may develop a deep trust with family caregivers, turning to them for parenting tips and help tapping into neighborhood resources.

*Families may feel comfortable keeping kids in their own neighborhoods and communities, sometimes choosing caretakers with the same cultural background and similar parenting styles as their own.*

"Usually there's some similarity between providers and families they're servicing. They're in the same community and sometimes share the same culture or background," says Diana Perez, director of child care services at the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDco) in the Bronx, which works with 300 licensed family child care providers, with 42 included in an EarlyLearn network.

Unlike at centers, where children typically move to new rooms led by unfamiliar caretakers when they hit new milestones, choosing a family child care provider can help ensure a child has continuity of caregiving through her first couple of years.

But the quality of home-based day cares varies. Home-based providers often work in isolation, caring for as many as 8 children at a time. There are no education requirements for becoming a family provider. Any adult looking after two or more children must be registered with or licensed by the state through the Department of

Health and Mental Hygiene, but this process primarily focuses on health and safety issues, rather than program quality, including a background check, a 15-hour mandated health and safety training, and a home inspection by the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene which checks things such as the temperature of the home and the safety and cleanliness of cribs.

A home-based child care provider must also manage the business, attending to record-keeping, accounting, marketing, and meeting with prospective families. All of these tasks take the caregiver's time away from children. "Within reduced organizational structure, these responsibilities may be especially burdensome, infringing on program quality," ACS wrote in its 2005 strategic plan.

At some homes, children take walks every day, have regularly scheduled story time and play with developmentally appropriate toys. At others, they spend large chunks of the day watching videos.

One national study found that of children under the age of 4, fewer than 4 percent in home-based care were in high-quality programs compared to 32 percent in center-based care, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

"The training and capabilities of the caregiver are lower in family settings," says Barnett of the National Institute for Early Education Research. "If you're just sitting in front of a TV, it doesn't matter how small the ratio is, that's not good."

EarlyLearn expects a lot of these homes, asking family providers to consider the developmental needs of children and to observe and document their progress. "You want to change from being a family-oriented service, to being an academic-oriented service," explains Cheryl Epperson, who oversees family child care at Sholom Day Care Inc., in Queens.

Sholom, which oversees 60 family day cares serving more than 100 children through EarlyLearn, is one of 28 family child care "network" organizations ACS relies on to monitor individual family day cares. These networks are typically community-based organizations connected to child care centers, with the expectation that, at age 3, children will move from home-based care into the center-based programs.

Staff from these network organizations visit the home providers to make sure they are meeting state licensing standards and ACS program guidelines. They connect parents of babies and toddlers with providers, train providers on things like how to follow a curriculum and write a lesson plan, and give them technical assistance and help with paperwork. Some networks ask providers to submit lesson plans with their payroll information. Others ask to see the lessons only when they visit a home, about every other month. Most networks work directly with caregivers on child assessments and screenings.

Networks say this oversight has its limits. "Family day cares are subcontractors, and you cannot enforce what happens in an individual's home. You don't have the say. It's their home," says Laura Kollins, assistant executive director of early childhood services at Hamilton-Madison House, which oversees about 50 EarlyLearn homes with 150 children.

"There's only so much an organization can impose on a provider without becoming an employer," says Perez.

EarlyLearn asks home providers to assume many of the roles of educators, but most of these caretakers are not, in fact, educators. Some providers do not have high school diplomas or GEDs and many speak English as a second language. Most lack the training to do assessments, write lesson plans and use a curriculum—tasks that can be challenging even for certified teachers.

"The providers are not educators. The providers are working toward providing the best quality of care they can, given their level of experience and their understanding of child development," says Perez. "They are not all college graduates nor will they ever be college graduates with a background in early education."

Kollins describes the lesson plans provided by her family providers as being very "childlike." Her staff will correct them and send them back, asking providers to rewrite them over and over in a process frustrating to both parties. "We're just pushing them," she says. "It's hard on our staff. We have to push, push, push."

Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York is an old organization with a formidable social services team. It sends staff from that branch to work closely with home-based providers and to conduct developmental screenings and assess children. Even so, says Enrico Rivera, assistant coordinator of family child care at Catholic Charities' Queensbridge site, it has been challenging to get providers to adhere to the documentation required by EarlyLearn and provide data that can actually "serve a larger purpose," like letting the agency identify which children need, say, occupational therapy.

Most networks devote professional development days to informing home-based providers about the basics of EarlyLearn—how to use the curriculum, observe children, enter assessments into the computers at their centers, or use assessments to guide lesson plans. But getting family providers to the trainings is difficult. Some providers care not only for children enrolled in EarlyLearn, but also some whose parents are paying out-of-pocket or with vouchers; in order to attend an EarlyLearn training, the provider must hire and pay a substitute who is pre-approved by the city.

Some agencies working with home-based child care providers say EarlyLearn is trying to change their role too much. Kollins thinks EarlyLearn should focus less on turning providers into educators, and more on making sure they have information on



the developmental needs of different age groups of children, and how best to support each age group's development. For instance, caregivers would learn the importance of eye contact and floor time for infants. Assessments, she thinks, could be swapped for simple checklists of things to look for—like whether a baby responds to noises—written in many languages.

Other network leaders applaud the benefits of professionalizing the field, saying it can bring renewed energy to a practice that has been around for as long as families needed help with their children. What's needed, they say, is more money to provide solid training.

Catholic Charities would like all of its family providers to have Child Development Associate degrees, or CDAs, and the organization is using its professional development days to help them earn credits.

At Sholom, Epperson hopes to partner with a teaching school that would let her providers take early education classes for free or a

reduced rate. Students from the school could practice their new skills in their day cares as assistants, bringing the latest ideas and practices in early education directly to home programs. But every time she gets close to making progress on a plan, Epperson says she hits a logistical barrier—the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, for instance, does not permit assistants to be registered to help out in more than one home. It's just one of many frustrating catch-22s, she says, that reflect a bigger problem inherent to EarlyLearn: It's a great vision, backed with inadequate resources.

“I think it's wonderful that [ACS is] finally doing some thinking about what [family day care is] and what providers need to learn and how they need to learn that,” she says. “But, by that same token, give them some of the things that they need in order to do that.” ✿

### *Can Small Programs Survive? (continued from page 39)*

Brooklyn Kindergarten Society is a mid-sized EarlyLearn provider with a central office of administrative and fundraising staff. It has the infrastructure—and the business expertise—to bring in a steady flow of private donations. “We don't worry about supplies, we don't worry about being able to hire substitutes,” says Jim Matison, the executive director. The program uses private money for enrichment services like science, art, dance and chess. In the spring, they'll add horseback riding and swimming lessons.

Matison says that it's possible to serve a community intimately, even when a provider is not an organic product of the neighborhood. “We hire as many people as we can from the community. We're sensitive to community needs. It is possible to be a larger organization and maintain that connection to the community.”

With EarlyLearn, the city has begun to reap the benefits of a more standardized child care system: program outcomes that can be mandated and assessed; budgets that show efficient use of taxpayers' dollars. The question is, has it bought those benefits at the expense of idiosyncrasies that that once allowed neighborhoods to identify and meet their own needs? In its attempt to ensure high-quality services for children, has it crippled organizations that make those children's communities strong?

“In impoverished circumstances, resources become people rather than money,” says Lisa Caswell, a senior policy analyst at the Day Care Council. “If people know each other and are invested in a resource like a child care center, if you have generations going to the same place, kids growing up and bringing their kids there, if you can point to a kid who stayed out of trouble because he was connected to a caring community, you can't take that contract away and think you've done something good.” ✿



## An Unequal Distribution of Child Care Vouchers

The majority of vouchers for low-income families are used at Jewish religious schools.

Each year, the city gives out thousands of vouchers to help families pay for day care and afterschool programs. Under federal law, the majority go to families receiving public assistance benefits. When funding is left over, the city distributes vouchers to low-income, working parents, who may use them to pay for child care in any setting they choose.

In theory, these vouchers should be available to working families across the city. However, as of the beginning of 2014, nearly 50 percent of the low-income vouchers were used in just two Brooklyn neighborhoods, each home to politically powerful Orthodox Jewish communities, according to an analysis of data obtained from the Administration for Children's Services (ACS).

Of the city's total of 13,400 low-income vouchers for families not on public assistance, 28 percent were used at schools and day cares in Williamsburg; another 21 percent in Borough Park. Even outside of those neighborhoods, yeshivas and other Jewish religious organizations were by far the biggest recipients of voucher funds: Of all the low-income vouchers used at formal day care centers and schools in January 2014, nearly 80 percent were paid to Jewish religious organizations.

Orthodox communities have a pressing need for subsidized child care. Borough Park has the highest density of low-income children of any neighborhood in the city, and Williamsburg is not far behind, according to Census data.

Supporters of the vouchers also point out that Orthodox families may not have the option to enroll in publicly funded child care programs that hold contracts with the city—partly because secular programs aren't equipped to meet their children's needs; partly because the programs simply don't exist near their homes.

"There is sometimes a lack of contracted options for parents in their neighborhoods," says Isaac Sofer, a spokesperson for the Central United Talmudical Academy. "Furthermore, in a number of communities many residents speak English as a second language, requiring providers to have specialized skills to work with parents and care for children. Vouchers help fill these gaps in the contract system and provide families with the flexibility to find the child care that best suits them."

Sofer's organization received payment from over 1,100 vouchers in January—more than any provider other than the United Talmudical Academy. The two organizations are run by separate branches of a divided Hasidic sect. Together, they received 20 percent of the city's total supply of low-income vouchers.

The city distributes child care vouchers, which pay anywhere from \$100 to \$330 per week, according to a priority scale. The highest priority families include those with kids in foster care or under the watch of the city's child welfare agency, as well as those whose parents receive cash assistance. Any leftover funds go to families earning less than 275 percent of the federal poverty line, on a first-come, first-served basis.

The vouchers are an increasingly scarce commodity. Due to a series of budget cuts, the city has eliminated nearly 10,000 low-income vouchers since 2008. Some priority categories have been erased altogether, including those for caregivers who leave work due to a temporary illness.

*Nearly half  
of the city's  
vouchers for  
low-income  
families were  
used in just  
two Brooklyn  
neighborhoods.*

Child care advocates say that families who request the vouchers at ACS, or through the city's 311 hotline, are regularly told that none are available. At a recent City Council hearing, ACS Commissioner Gladys Carrión said that more than 11,000 families had applied for the vouchers 12 months ago and were eligible to reapply.

Throughout the budget cuts, however, there has been a great deal of political muscle expended to preserve vouchers for Orthodox communities. The most recent category to be cut was known as Priority 7, a set-aside for families that had “family dysfunction, family needs or family problems”—including those with one working parent and a large number of children. From its invention, this category was used almost exclusively by Orthodox families.

Priority 7 vouchers were on the budgetary chopping block several times during the Bloomberg administration, but members of the City Council—including current Mayor Bill de Blasio, whose City Council district during the 2000s included parts of Borough Park—pushed back, restoring funds until a final, major cut in 2012. During his mayoral campaign, de Blasio promised Jewish leaders that he would restore vouchers for Orthodox families.

That hasn't happened so far. However, the city has indicated that \$1.7 million in new funding for afterschool programs will be designated to serve families who were once eligible for Priority 7 vouchers. *Hamodia*, one of the city's Orthodox newspapers, quotes Avi Fink, a deputy chief of staff to de Blasio, saying that the afterschool money is a first step.

“We can't fund Priority 7 without funding priorities 1 through 6, which [costs] hundreds of millions of dollars,” Fink told *Hamodia*. “So, instead of saying, hey, we can't afford the hundreds of millions of dollars so we can't afford anything, what the mayor said was, let me at least start restoring these programs, like I said I would.”

The mayor's office did not respond to our requests for comment.

The distribution of low-income child care vouchers created a short-lived scandal in 2000, when the *Daily News* reported that half of the city's then-total of 13,000 low-income vouchers had been distributed to families in Brooklyn's four most heavily Orthodox neighborhoods.

At the time, Rabbi Milton Balkany, the dean of an Orthodox girls' school in Borough Park who was known to the press as the “Brooklyn Bundler” for his facility at amassing campaign contributions (and who was, much later, sent to prison for extortion, blackmail and wire fraud) claimed that he had received permission from a high-level aide to then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to process and submit hundreds of voucher applications for Jewish families, who were approved without an interview by the city. After an outcry from groups including 100 Blacks in Law Enforcement Who Care, the voucher distribution was investigated by the U.S. Attorney's Office.

More than a decade later, however, the city's vouchers for low-income families are even more unevenly distributed than they were in 2000. ✱

*Throughout the budget cuts, there has been a great deal of political muscle expended to preserve vouchers for Orthodox communities.*

# Universal Pre-K and the Future of EarlyLearn

## How will UPK expansion impact its feeder system?

This fall, the city will expand its universal pre-kindergarten (UPK) program for 4-year-olds, more than doubling the number of full-day seats available in public schools and community-based organizations. The expansion represents a major investment in high-quality programs for young children. Ironically, however, it also threatens to add strain to the city's existing—and already shaky—infrastructure for providing child care and early education to low-income kids.

In its current form, EarlyLearn offers seats for approximately 12,600 4-year-olds, spread across preschools and child care centers throughout the city. A few hours of the day are paid for by the city's existing UPK program; the rest by a blend of Head Start and child care funding. The UPK hours are free for families, but most parents pay a fee to help offset the cost of the remaining program hours.

*The city took a big step forward for early childhood, but it created unintended consequences.*

In September, the UPK portion of the day will increase to 6 hours and 20 minutes. EarlyLearn programs serving 4-year-olds will receive an infusion of funds, most of which will be spent to raise teacher salaries: Under the city's expansion plan, UPK teachers in community-based organizations will earn a starting salary of \$44,000 to \$50,000 per year—a significant jump from their current average of \$36,000 to \$40,000.

Early childhood providers have been advocating for teacher raises for years. But the expansion poses complicated problems for programs that also care for younger kids. “The city took a big step forward for early childhood,” says Michael Zisser, the executive director of University Settlement. “But it created unintended consequences.”

One of those consequences is an increased disparity in salaries. After the expansion, teachers in some UPK classrooms will earn as much as—or even more than—the directors of their centers, says Andrea

Anthony, the executive director of the Day Care Council. “I’m thrilled that the mayor decided to pay UPK teachers a better wage,” Anthony says. “But remember that someone needs to run these programs. Directors are responsible for supervising classrooms, for helping teachers make plans for individual children. The director is the one who will be held responsible if something happens to that child. Without the director, you really don’t have a high-quality program.”

Teachers in classrooms for children under age 4 will remain at their current salaries, which many directors describe as poverty-level wages. With the creation of thousands of better-paying jobs in UPK classrooms, some providers fear that highly qualified teachers will flee EarlyLearn classrooms.

Maria Contreras-Collier, the executive director of the Cypress Hills Child Care Corporation, says she’s already been asked to write recommendations for several teachers looking for new jobs in UPK classrooms. “It breaks my heart,” Contreras-Collier says. “They’re amazing teachers and I hate to see them go. But I’m not going to refuse to write a letter of reference. They have student loans, they have families. It’s a really big difference in salary.”

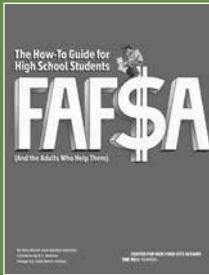
Jobs in public schools are especially attractive, since teachers work shorter days and fewer months per year—with better benefits and guaranteed salary increases—than their counterparts in community-based organizations. At the Brooklyn Kindergarten Society, two teachers have already received offers from the Department of Education, says Jim Matison, the organization’s executive director.

In addition to siphoning away teachers, some EarlyLearn providers fear the UPK expansion will lead to a loss of children. The subsidized child care system has suffered from under-enrollment for close to a decade (See “Empty Seats,” page 28). Since providers are paid a certain rate per child, empty seats destabilize programs’ budgets, sometimes making it impossible to cover basic expenses like rent and insurance.

With the new UPK classrooms, competition to recruit 4-year-olds will become far more intense. EarlyLearn providers have some advantages over straightforward UPK programs: Because of their blended funding, they offer full-day programs and don’t close for the summer. But they also charge parent fees and require families to undergo a cumbersome certification process. “If a parent wants to enroll with us, they have to answer two hours of questions,” says Takiema Bunche-Smith, of the Brooklyn Kindergarten Society. “Or they can walk into a public school and fill out one sheet of paper.”

“Have you seen *Titanic*?” Bunche-Smith asks. “Remember the part where the ship was sinking? That’s kind of what [UPK] means for child care.” ❀

ALSO AVAILABLE FROM THE CENTER FOR NEW YORK CITY AFFAIRS AT THE NEW SCHOOL



**FAFSA:**  
*THE HOW-TO GUIDE FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS  
(AND THE ADULTS WHO HELP THEM)*

Filling out the FAFSA form is often the first step for students seeking financial support to go to college. Understanding the form and handling it confidently is crucial for college matriculation and success. This “how-to” guide was written in partnership with New York City’s most experienced college guidance and financial aid professionals. It addresses the most common questions of NYC students and families. The guide is easy to read and engaging for both students and adults. We hope it will demystify the FAFSA and make it less intimidating. Published January 2013.



**CHILD WELFARE WATCH, Volume 23**  
*BABY STEPS: POVERTY, CHRONIC STRESS, AND NEW YORK'S  
YOUNGEST CHILDREN*

Scientific research has firmly established that early childhood experiences can have a tremendous impact on our lifelong well-being. When infants are exposed to chronic stress or trauma, the effect can be toxic, stunting brain growth and changing the trajectories of their lives. On the other hand, giving babies the care and attention they need provides a strong foundation for future development.

In this issue of *Child Welfare Watch*, we look at the science of early childhood development—and we illuminate how supportive, nurturing caregivers can buffer children from the negative impacts of early adversity, including the stress that so often accompanies intractable poverty.

*These and other publications are available electronically at [www.centernyc.org](http://www.centernyc.org).*

*To order print copies or join our mailing list, please email [centernyc@newschool.edu](mailto:centernyc@newschool.edu).*

*A Project of the Center for New York City Affairs at The New School*

**INSIDESCHOOLS.ORG**

New York City’s public schools have been changing at a dizzying pace. Throughout it all, Insideschools.org has been a powerful force for excellence in public education. Insideschools.org provides parents and the public with timely, comprehensive information about New York City’s schools. Our trained reporters visit hundreds of schools a year, write profiles, produce slideshows, and synthesize data about each school in an easy-to-understand format. Our new InsideStats scorecards provide meaningful data on each of the city’s high schools that go far beyond student academic achievement as measured by standardized tests. Our detailed, independent information fosters parent involvement, energizes innovative school leaders and spurs improvements in individual schools and citywide. Visit [Insideschools.org](http://Insideschools.org) to learn more.

**CENTER FOR NEW YORK CITY AFFAIRS**  
**THE NEW SCHOOL**

**ABOUT THIS REPORT**

In October 2012, New York City launched EarlyLearnNYC, a plan that would upend its system for providing subsidized child care to working class and low-income families. The Bloomberg administration set out to take the city's large and unwieldy assortment of early care and education programs and blend them into a unified, holistic system serving children 6 weeks to 4 years old. Officials intended for this new system to spur improvements in program quality, but two years into EarlyLearnNYC, the reform has produced, at best, mixed results.

This report examines EarlyLearnNYC and the impact it has had on programs and families. Drawing on dozens of in-depth interviews with program directors, early childhood experts, policy makers, advocates, parents, front-line workers, union leaders and other stakeholders, it tells the story of EarlyLearn's rocky, underfunded implementation to its tenuous future in the wake of Mayor de Blasio's expansion of universal pre-kindergarten. It finds that two years in, enrollment in subsidized programs continues to lag and that a number of small neighborhood programs have foundered under new and higher costs and heavier programmatic and administrative burdens. It also highlights the many teachers who now struggle to keep up with increased expectations in the classroom while many perks of their job have disappeared since the reform. Still, it finds that the original vision of EarlyLearn remains strong, and lays out a series of recommendations for how the city can build on the solid foundation it provides.

**MILANO SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, MANAGEMENT, AND URBAN POLICY AT THE NEW SCHOOL**

Milano blends critical theory with hands-on practice, progressive thinking with social engagement, and research with reflection in action. The unparalleled faculty of scholars and practitioners engage in multidisciplinary, critical approaches that challenge prevailing wisdom. Milano graduates lead public, private, and nongovernmental institutions around the world and in New York City. For more information, contact the admissions office at 212.229.5150 or 800.862.5039 or visit <http://www.newschool.edu/public-engagement/milano-school>.