



Testimony to the New York State Assembly--January 28, 2014
W. Steven Barnett, Board of Governors Professor and Director
National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University

We ask a lot of public Pre-K programs: we expect them to foster stronger academic success, teach social skills, build character, and provide child care. Big expectations for their effects are based on the successes of the Perry Preschool, Abecedarian, and other intensive preschool programs. In recent years, however, evaluations of the effects of preschool programs, most notably Head Start, have produced decidedly mixed results. Some have been downright disappointing.

That is why when we invest in preschool programs we need to face hard facts. The outcomes we want require quality and intensity that do not come cheap. Weak programs will be found to yield modest (if any) effects. That is also why we should pay special attention to programs that have managed to produce strong results.

One such program is in New Jersey's Abbott districts, where a universal high-quality full-day pre-K program for 3- to 4-year-olds has produced dramatic gains. At about \$13,000 per child it provides well-qualified, adequately paid teachers; a maximum class size of 15; and a support system of teacher coaches and continuous improvement focused on learning and teaching in cities with high concentrations of poverty. Our Institute's recent follow-up study found this program to substantially increase scores on state achievement tests at grades 3, 4, and 5 while reducing grade repetition and special education.

In 1997, New York launched an even more ambitious preschool program than New Jersey's Abbott model, by creating a statewide Universal Pre-K (UPK) program. Unfortunately, this program has periodically lost traction, and the recent recession appears to have been particularly detrimental. Today fewer than half of the state's 4-year-olds receive UPK, and the percentage served has actually fallen since 2010 to just 43 percent. Worse yet, state funding per child in UPK hit its lowest level in a decade

adjusted for inflation in 2012. This funding decline puts the program's promised results at risk.

It is in this context that recent proposals to expand and strengthen UPK are so heartening. In last Wednesday's budget address, Governor Andrew Cuomo renewed the promise to provide quality UPK in New York State, with the goal of helping the program move towards the "universal" part of its name and provide a full school day. His budget proposal starts with \$100 million in the first year and pledges to scale up funding over five years.

In addition, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio has made quality, full-day universal pre-K a signature issue of his administration with a commitment to provide adequate funding secured by a new revenue source. Mayor de Blasio has noted that in New York City demand for UPK far outstrips availability, and he has proposed an increased income tax on those earning over \$500,000 to raise the estimated \$340 million needed to pay for quality pre-K for all New York City children.

That pre-k has attracted these new commitments in the Empire State is incredibly promising. No single reform could do more to improve education in New York than ensuring that every child has access to a good full-day preschool education. As New Jersey's Abbott program indicates, a strong Pre-K program can raise achievement and reduce school failure. Further on, we expect better health, decreased crime, and greater productivity on the job.

The magnitude of the investment that UPK needs in New York should not be underestimated--the need is not just to expand access, but also to raise quality and offer a full school day. Plans developed by New York City alone could consume more than \$100 million this year. Relying on a mixed public-private system--as we did in New Jersey--permits rapid progress. The legislature should provide a secure funding mechanism so that New York City and other districts can move ahead as rapidly as they are able to extend access and ensure the effectiveness of UPK. To do so is both good economics and good education policy.

###

The National Institute for Early Education Research (www.nieer.org), a unit of the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, supports early childhood education policy by providing objective, nonpartisan information based on research.