

Opinion: The City Needs to Hit Pause on Childcare Policy

By Diana Perez, Gladys Jones and Ramon Peguero | August 12, 2019

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Rob Bennett for the Office of Mayor Bill de Blasio

Mayor Bill de Blasio during a visit to a childcare facility in 2014.

The first five years of life are critical to a child's physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development. High-quality, affordable child care during this period has been proven to boost future academic success, and can mitigate some of poverty's detrimental effects. At the same time, affordable child care is crucial for the economic success of New York City families, who cannot work or pursue their own educational goals if they are full-time caregivers.

Yet, in a city where nearly half of all community districts meet the definition of an infant care desert—neighborhoods where there are child care spots for less than 20 percent of

kids under two years old—quality early childhood education is hard to come by, especially for low-income families.

Child care providers and advocates, like us, were appreciative of the city's renewed focus on early childhood learning when it was announced in 2017 that the birth-to-five early childhood care and education system would be transferred from the Administration for Children's Services to the Department of Education (DOE), including EarlyLearn NYC, Head Start programs, and Family Child Care Networks.

We were glad to be part of the DOE's Advisory Group, and were especially hopeful that there would be increased assistance for Family Child Care Networks, operated by community-based organizations that support licensed Home-Based Child Care and Group Family Child Care providers. A critical component of the city's early child care and education landscape, these networks are responsible for providing thousands of high-quality child care spots each year in small-scale settings. The transition to the DOE must be rolled out thoughtfully, and in cooperation with family child care providers, in order for it to be successful.

Unfortunately, the details for Family Child Care Networks laid out in the city's RFP fail to address a number of crucial issues that organizations such as ours have raised with the city multiple times. As a group, we do not believe the DOE's plan for Family Child Care Networks can be successfully rolled out unless these and other critical issues are addressed:

- **Provider Compensation:** While we appreciate that the DOE recently raised provider rates to be more in line with State OCFS-set rates, the DOE must allow room for further discussions over rates that will intentionally move towards pay equity for this valuable workforce, reflect the increased work expectations for providers, fund the true cost of providing high-quality care, offer additional compensation for providers who operate extended day programs, and stabilize the home-based childcare sector.
- **Transparency in Budget Guidelines:** The current city practice puts the burden on organizations to supplement the true cost of running a high-quality network, which inherently sets up inequities based on the size, capacity and diversity of the various organizations holding network contracts. Further, the current RFP does not state whether there is a maximum budget allowance per Network. Organizations operating Family Child Care Networks must be provided guidelines by which to set their rates, which should include funding to offer competitive salaries for network staff, overhead and indirect costs, and other related costs tied to unfunded mandates.
- **Transition Plans:** The DOE should clearly outline transition plans for existing networks that are not awarded new contracts or existing networks who don't respond to the new RFP. Otherwise, it risks disrupting business and continuity of care, and disturbing existing community, family, and infant/toddler ties to care.

- **Enrollment:** The DOE must provide clarity on how it plans to support providers and networks to engage with the centralized enrollment system, as well as how it will practice transparency in matching parents to their preferred setting and program. The DOE must also eliminate the pay-for-enrollment model, which is unduly punitive on networks that need to maintain set levels of funding and staffing to ensure consistent high-quality supports and services.

- **Fair Marketing:** A comprehensive public education campaign should be developed that intentionally presents Family Child Care and Group Family Child Care as viable, high-quality options within the DOE system.

Because these issues, and a number of other issues, have not been addressed appropriately by the DOE, we are calling on the city to further postpone the Family Child Care Network RFP deadline, in order to allow for a transparent conversation with advocates and providers around all issues and provide time to address these points within the RFP. Ultimately, we feel that the current RFP should be revised to incorporate addendums that address the issues raised by advocates.

If the DOE chooses to move forward implementing the program without resolving these issues, it will cause harm to the child care sector, and negatively impact thousands of children and families who rely on these services.

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