

Child Care at the Crossroads

Publicly funded child care is at a crossroads. Throughout the Day Care Council's membership, there is a pervasive atmosphere of uncertainty. Rumors abound. Allegations are made. Yet, very little information is forthcoming. Recently, three teachers asked me, "Is the City trying to do away with child care services as we know it?" I assured them that there would always be child care services for low-income families. The answer seemed to satisfy them. But, quite frankly, I could not address in what form or by which system these services would be provided. With the recent loss of after-school funding, new mandates by the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) to achieve full enrollment, state regulations imposing child support enforcement, and the lack of ACS staff to support the community-based eligibility system, it's a wonder publicly funded child care programs exist at all.

The transfer of after-school funding from ACS to the Department of Youth and Community

Development (DYCD) became official on September 8, 2006. Prior to that date, youth and child care advocates fought hard to convince city officials that such a transfer was a mistake. There were City Council hearings, press conferences, newspaper articles and posi-

tion papers echoing the distinct differences between after school programs for young children under ACS and those funded by DYCD for older children. The architect of the transfer remained convinced that ACS after-school programs simply were more

costly. It was a substantial financial and organizational blow for day care centers to lose 30 to 60 children, layoff staff, and try maintain services for remaining families, all in one year. Now, the publicly funded child care community is trying to re-group. Many have elected to serve infants and toddlers, others have chosen to continue their after school programs. Unfortunately,

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there is little or no public funding available for either.

Another devastating impairment has been the new child support enforcement regulations. Single parents are now being asked to "show legal proof" of financial support from the absent parent. In many cases, parents simply refuse to comply with this new regulation based on fear of retaliation from the absent parent or resistance to having government interfere with their family matters. Whatever the reason, this regulation has limited the number of families applying for subsidized child care and reduced the number of children enrolled.

Child care directors also are being asked to directly enroll families and submit the paperwork to ACS for verification. Unfortunately, many directors cite obstacles when processing enrollments. According to one director, three families were eligible for child care. She submitted the paperwork, but never heard back

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from ACS. When it came time to verify enrollment, her statistics and those in ACS' computer system did not match. She showed a higher enrollment than ACS. Was it the paperwork processing by an ACS worker or lack thereof, or a computer problem which slowed the system? Who knows?

Under-enrollment at child care centers is a real problem which must be addressed. However, the solution should not be closure of programs. Given the proposed expansion of Universal Pre-kindergarten to full day, we need as many available slots in the community as we can find. To its credit, District Council 1707 has made agency closures a top priority and is applying resources to keep this issue in the public's eye. We must provide agencies with technical assistance to deal with changing neighborhood demographics and other obstacles to enrollment. ACS has assured me that it has no present plans to close child care centers, that centers will receive help in meeting enrollment targets. That is a good and positive move considering what is before us.

The recent report by the Mayor's Commission for Economic Opportunity (CEO) concluded that "investments in young children by definition are an investment in the future." The report calls for a range of programs to address poverty among young children including expanded health insurance and several strategies to promote early learning, including expansion of UPK. In light of these recommendations, why are publicly funded child care programs facing such uncertainty at this time? If the political will and desire to address poverty truly

exists, then the publicly funded child care system must be a partner in that quest.

A system can only flourish when it is given the attention it needs and deserves. Ever since its merger into the newly created ACS, advocates and providers have questioned whether child care truly could be a priority for an agency with the primary mission of child protection. Over the past seven years, the ACS Child Care and Head Start Division has witnessed a succession of "acting" or confirmed Deputy Commissioners: Fazio, Newman, Cobb, Marino, Chaudry, and now Hartzog. All were and are committed individuals. However, the unit is in constant transition – one person leaves and another comes in with new ideas and a new plan.

ACS' most recent "strategic plan" entitled *Rethinking Child Care* (authored by Chaudry) outlines six goals starting with assessing community needs to better target services; streamlining the enrollment process; establishing new performance measures; etc. etc. The problem with this plan is the lack of financial resources, both internally within ACS, i.e., staff shortages, and externally for contracted child care programs, needed to meet these goals. Most importantly, *Rethinking Child Care* was drafted and released without the full input of the people it will affect the most, such as providers, parents and sponsoring board members. Even today, there is no coordinated effort to bring child care and Head Start providers together to begin strategic planning and work on an implementation plan. Nor does *Rethinking Child Care* address the issue of coordina-

tion with UPK which is becoming an increasingly important component of the City's early childhood programming.

The City needs a single agency which brings together all early childhood education programs – child care, Head Start, UPK, early intervention services and after-school programs for younger children aged 6 through 11. Only with a single agency will true coordination of these programs become a reality.

What are the alternatives? Merge with the Department of Education, remain with ACS or create a new stand alone City agency for Early Childhood Education? Each of these alternatives has their own advantages and disadvantages. What will be most important is having the focus and political will to shape a single early childhood system we can be proud of.

The publicly funded child care system was created in response to a fundamental need that still exists today – even more so according to the CEO report. There are many talented individuals within City government and the nonprofit community. Together we should be able to sustain that system to meet new challenges. However, the nonprofit community must be seen as equal partners and the city must open communications and commit the necessary financial resources to maintain high quality services. Only in this way can we serve working parents who are the engine that keeps New York City running and their children who are our future.

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