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Proposed FY 2025-26 Executive Budget

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony on the 2025-26 New York State executive budget. My name is Dona Anderson, and I am the executive director of the New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute at the City University of New York. The Institute oversees the Aspire Registry, New York's early childhood workforce registry; QUALITYstarsNY, the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System for early childhood programs; and 10 regional Early Childhood Career Development Centers across the state. I also co-chair the state's Early Childhood Advisory Council and sat on the governor's Child Care Availability Task Force alongside many of my esteemed colleagues.

We have been strong supporters of the governor's vision for making child care more accessible and affordable for New Yorkers — a vision we have seen tremendous advancement toward in the last several years. We commend the proposals in this executive budget that would result in continued progress for children, families, and the many thousands of educators across the state who work with young children. These proposals include the child care construction and renovation grants, which will give families more options for child care and help ensure safe learning environments for young children, and the enhanced Empire State Child Credit.

We especially want to highlight the critical need for a child care worker substitute pool, which this budget proposes to create. In October 2024, our New York Works for Children initiative released a report that examined the results of a survey of over 1,000 early care and learning providers across the state. That report showed that among educators with paid leave, about 30% reported taking no paid leave in the last 12 months. For family child care providers, this number grew to 60%. For many of these educators, a lack of access to reliable substitute providers is a deterrent to using the leave to which they are entitled.

When early childhood educators don't have access to dependable substitutes, they feel obligated to report to work while they are unwell or close their doors completely for the day, leaving families stranded without care. Dedicated educators should not be forced to choose between caring for children and caring for their own well-being. A substitute pool would ease the burden that falls on early childhood educators when they are ill. A substitute pool would also allow educators to access crucial professional development and training opportunities, many of which take place during the workday. We commend the state for taking this step toward bolstering the workforce that diligently cares for our state's youngest children.

As our state continues to invest in expanding access to child care, it's crucial that we remember that dependable, high-quality child care allows our economy to function — and that a dependable, high-quality child care system begins with a skilled, fairly compensated workforce.

In New York, we know that demand for child care is high. We also know that in order to recruit and retain talented, well-prepared professionals to careers in early childhood, we must invest in a system of equitable compensation and benefits that takes education, credentials, and experience into account. Our New York Works for Children report showed that annual compensation for early childhood educators in New York State classrooms is roughly equivalent to the local minimum wage. Even practitioners who have been teaching for over 20 years see little to no salary growth to recognize their decades of experience. With this in mind, it's no wonder many early childhood educators choose not to pursue advanced credentials, or leave the profession altogether.

Our state's Child Care Availability Task Force, a cross-sector group of state officials, early childhood policy experts, business owners, union leaders and early childhood educators, was charged by the governor with developing a potential implementation framework for a phased-in rollout of a universal child care system. In January, the task force released an ambitious, actionable roadmap for universal child care, which focuses on five critical building blocks: systems, workforce, quality, access, and affordability. The Task Force's recommendations for strengthening the child care workforce include establishing a permanent workforce compensation fund and expanding scholarships for child care providers. If we want our children to succeed, we must start by giving their teachers opportunities to succeed.

Much of what we know about those who work with young children in New York comes from the Aspire Registry, which includes participation from 72% of licensed child care centers in New York State. The Aspire Registry records and tracks education, credentials, employment history, and ongoing professional training for early childhood educators. Through the Aspire Registry, educators can find, enroll in and track professional development courses the state requires them to take in order to provide safe, high-quality child care. A career ladder embedded in the Aspire Registry supports educators and providers as they pursue career growth. Aspire's rigorous standards and procedures help to ensure that New York's families have a child care workforce they can trust.

Nationwide, workforce registries like Aspire are essential to the infrastructure of a unified child care system. They allow states to collect comprehensive, verified data about early childhood practitioners; track education, training, and employment; and provide services and support, including connecting early childhood professionals to quality initiatives.

For these reasons, the Child Care Availability Task Force recommended that educators in all licensed programs and settings enroll in the Aspire Registry. It also recommended ensuring that our workforce registry data is linked with systems operated by the NYS Office of Children and Family Services, a process that will involve engaging with providers and stakeholders to ensure their needs are met.

We encourage the state to support the Aspire Registry in these efforts. An appropriately-funded Aspire Registry will provide comprehensive data on the early childhood workforce, helping policymakers ensure accountability, address staffing shortages, and inform training needs. This vision for the Aspire Registry also gives early childhood practitioners more access to professional development opportunities and career advancement pathways — which are essential for maintaining a high-quality child care system.

In last year's budget, the governor included funding to increase payment rates to child care providers who participate in programs designed to improve the quality of the care they provide — like QUALITYstarsNY, our state's Quality Rating and Improvement System for early childhood programs. QUALITYstarsNY helps equip the early childhood workforce with the expertise, training, and resources that they need to implement high-quality practices at their program and sets them up for long-term success in their career.

But without a sustained investment, early childhood programs and families could be left without clear standards for quality or a support system to build and sustain high-quality learning environments. A proper investment of \$25 million in the 2025-26 fiscal year would help ensure QUALITYstarsNY can continue to serve its participants, as well as support new programs.

An investment in the Aspire Registry and in QUALITYstarsNY is an investment in New York's early childhood workforce — and ultimately an investment in families and children who deserve high-quality care.

We have been proud to partner with the state in its efforts to strengthen child care for New York's children and families. We look forward to continuing to build an accessible, affordable child care system that fairly compensates educators and provides high-quality learning experiences for young children.

Thank you.