

# ***The Universal Prekindergarten Providers Association, Inc.***

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## **Testimony before the The New York City Council Commission on the Implementation of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE)**

### **Hearing IV: “Pre-K & After-School” December 8, 2004**

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The Universal Prekindergarten Providers Association (UPKPA) is a membership services organization formed by the community-based organizations (CBOs) --- nursery schools, day care centers, Head Start programs and special education preschools --- which are providing Universal Prekindergarten services under contract to the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE). The mission of the UPKPA is to support high quality educational interventions for UPK students while uniting, coordinating and representing the interests of New York City’s CBO providers and the children and families they serve in community-based settings.

The UPKPA is proud to have been invited to testify before the NYC Council’s Commission on the Implementation of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity. The UPKPA believes that we can offer this commission a unique perspective and a set of recommendations on how to meet the challenge of effectively using the CFE funds our city will receive to provide a high quality publicly-funded education for the children of New York City.

Because our membership is first and foremost comprised of early childhood educators, we already know what all good educators in our city have known for far too long: how to do more with less. Today we join you in this new and exciting challenge, how to do much more with more. The opportunities offered by the CFE are tempered by our need to move forward with the wisdom of Solomon, making choices of where to best invest in our educational system so that we can maximize fiscal effectiveness of our investment, address the most pressing needs and receive the greatest benefit in terms of enhancing the opportunities and outcomes for our children.

The UPKPA supports the use a portion of CFE monies to provide early childhood education services to all of the preschool children in New York City. We support the provision of full-day “UPK” services for four year olds and, at least, half day UPK programming for three year olds. We recommend making the “Universal

Prekindergarten” truly universal by providing all three and four year old children with the educational foundation they require to enter kindergarten primed for success. The aim of prekindergarten programming is to graduate students ready to read, eager to learn, able to “play well with others” and confident about their own creativity and abilities.

The UPKPA respects the fact that this commission was formed to frame its final recommendations with the insights gained from the wisdom of the many people who care so deeply about the future of this city and its children. Robert Fulghum’s book, All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten suggests a useful framework for our thinking. By taking the common understandings gained in a high-quality early childhood program and re-framing them as guideposts to a successful, productive and meaningful life, Fulghum exposed the depth and meaning of the learning for young children. Fulghum’s book, however, by concentrating on kindergarten, missed some important life lessons learned in pre-kindergarten. The UPKPA believes that it is some of the lessons of prekindergarten which can help us to make wise choices with regard to utilizing the CFE settlement.

What could a prekindergarten student tell us that would guide us make the right choices? What are the real lessons of prekindergarten which can help us now? The relevant lessons of prekindergarten are simple and potent truths. If one of our young students was here today she would tell you four things:

1. All good stories start at the beginning before they have a middle and an end;
2. When you are in the block corner making a tall building, you can make a bigger and better building, if you start with a strong foundation;
3. Sometimes what you need to make something really special and all your own, you need to go out and find stuff, not just use what is inside the box;
4. Friends working with you can help you get more done than you can do all by yourself.

As the representative of the UPKPA is my responsibility to translate the lessons of prekindergarten into what we need to do together to invest the CFE settlement wisely and effectively. Let us look at each of those lessons and expose their true meaning for us and the children we care about.

First, *all good stories start at the beginning before they have a middle and an end.* The good final outcomes we all desire for the students we graduate from the NYC public schools begin many years earlier, long before high school. While a significant investment in education needs to be made across the grades if we want the story to be a good one, were we to neglect to address the needs the earliest stage, prekindergarten programming, we are not telling the whole story. If our efforts do

not include the youngest of our students, the final story, “how it all comes out in the end” will not be as good.

Second, *when you are in the block corner making a tall building, you can make a bigger and better building, if you start with a strong foundation.* Prekindergarten students are active and “hands-on” learners. They learn by exploring and doing. They learn by trying and then trying again. The block corner is a perennial favorite of prekindergarten students where they can build and make real their dreams and ideas. It does not take a young child long in a block corner to discover the truth that if you want to build big, you have to start strong by building a solid foundation or all your hard work will come crashing down.

The UPKPA knows that the solid foundation of high quality early childhood education does indeed support the education of the whole child across all of the grades and on into life. By means of proof, The New York Times recently reported on the Perry Preschool Project. As early childhood educators we have followed this longitudinal study for over forty years. The Perry Preschool Project has studied children who attended a high quality preschool program right on through their adulthood. What has the Perry Preschool Project proven? That strong foundations support bigger and better buildings. Children from excellent prekindergarten programs are more likely to: be in regular, not special education; score higher on literacy tests; have higher grades in high school; graduate from high school; earn a college degree; be employed, earn more money and own their own home and car; have a savings account; be healthier and drug-abuse free; stay out of jail and give back to their communities. The Perry Project calculated that for every dollar invested in quality preschool education, society reaped a seventeen dollar return. That’s a strong foundation supporting a very big building indeed!

And what about our third prekindergarten lesson --- *Sometimes what you need to make something really special and all your own you need to go out and find stuff, not just use what is inside the box.* If we are convinced that an investment in the education and outcomes of our children should start early, how can we make that happen? If we look inside the “box” of resources of our public school system, all of the pieces we need to create our work of art are simply not there. We may have the will, but what is the way? Ask any administrator in our school system. We simply don’t have enough space in our public school buildings across this city to do all of the things that we have wanted to do and now, because of the CFE settlement, perhaps can finally afford to do. Education takes space and while capital expansion will build more and better space, that is years away from completion. Our students need an answer right now and that answer has been there all along, right outside the “box” of our school system.

The answer is to continue and expand the partnership between the community-based early childhood education programs and the New York City Department of Education. Our “CBOs” can house prekindergarten programming funded and overseen by the Department, freeing up space in public school buildings to achieve lower class size in

the grades and a host of other initiatives which require physical space utilization. CBOs have the space, skill and experience to house and implement the Universal Prekindergarten program for many of our three and four year old children. We can indeed create what we want if we “look outside of the box”.

Finally, what about our fourth and last prekindergarten lesson? Even long out of prekindergarten ourselves, we need to remember that *with friends working with you can help you get more done than you can do all by yourself*. In NYS the law that created the Universal Pre-Kindergarten Program was wisely developed and we now have the opportunity to springboard off of that wisdom. Our lawmakers knew that the community of early childhood programs had not only physical resources which could be utilized in furtherance of the UPK program’s goals; they knew something even more important. They realized that the CBOs were a valuable repository of skills, knowledge and experience working with prekindergarten students. NYS law directs that 10% of UPK services be contracted out to CBOs, even in areas of our state not as sorely pressed for space as are NYC’s public schools. The UPK law was structured on the understanding that CBOs have more to offer than physical classrooms, they have been the cornerstone of service delivery to the preschool population all along. Here in NYC the CBOs have been essential to delivering UPK services right from the start. CBOs have always represented a significant percentage of the UPK service sites made available for parent selection.

The UPKPA encourages this Commission to direct the expansion of the existing partnership between the NYCDOE and the CBOs in the implementation of the UPK program. Integral to the continuation and expansion of the partnership of the NYCDOE with the CBOs, there needs to be a dialogue between the CBOs and the Department. Together we need to discover how to strengthen this partnership through contracting approaches which provide the NYCDOE with control of educational standards and curriculum while sustaining the economic viability of the CBOs. The UPKPA embraces its partnership with the NYCDOE because we know that by working together as friends we can do more together for the children of this city than we can do by ourselves.

In closing, the UPKPA again wants to thank the Commission for the opportunity to testify at today’s hearings. We hope that together we can find a way to move forward which utilizes the four lessons our prekindergarten students could teach us. By remembering those lessons, may our determination to do what is best for our children be reinforced and may we show the wisdom needed to choose the right path.