

## The Components of Quality Early Education

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Good afternoon. I am Todd Boressoff, and will be speaking today about the components of quality early education. But first I would like to thank this City Council Commission on CFE for reaching out so thoughtfully to the early education community at this time of great opportunity for our city. I must point out that little I report here is new. I am simply passing along components of quality well established through years of research. They are taught in the best institutions of higher education and often captured in local, state and national regulations.

But before I discuss the components I would like to touch on the perhaps obvious question: "Why quality?" In brief the answer is: *for children, for families, for our future.* *Children* in high quality early education programs perform better in later schooling and throughout life. They require fewer costly interventions while in school, and fewer costly services later on. More graduate high school and they earn more and pay higher taxes when they go to work. *Families* of children in quality early education are more self-sufficient – better able to concentrate on work, with fewer stress-related health problems. They are better educated and better able to deal with family crises. And our collective *future* is enriched as these successes translate into powerful cost benefits.

The Perry Preschool Project, written up in the *NY Times Magazine* on November 21, has now followed children receiving high quality early education through *forty* years. Their study has demonstrated cost benefits amounting to seventeen dollars for every one invested. And quality early education has other future benefits. "This study proves that investing in high quality pre-kindergarten can make every family in America safer from crime and violence. Law enforcement leaders know that to win the war on crime, we need to be as willing to guarantee our kids space in a pre-kindergarten program as we are to guarantee a criminal a prison cell." This is from Sanford Newman, president of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, an anti-crime organization of 2,000 police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors, and victims of violence.

So what are the components of quality?

### **Teachers and Other Adults**

The most important component of quality early education is the teaching staff. Because early education is rooted in relationships, young children require skilled, knowledgeable, well-educated, consistently available and ever-learning adults in the classroom. In New

York City *well-educated* means a masters degree in early childhood within five years of beginning teaching, the same as any teacher at the Department of Education.

*Consistently available* speaks to sufficient staff and low staff turnover. Sufficient staff means adhering to the NYC Department of Health guidelines for teacher/child ratios, which for four-year-olds is one adult per six to ten children (depending on group size) *at all times*. To allow for breaks and periods for staff meetings and training, this generally means averaging more than two adults per classroom. Research shows that high staff turnover has a direct, inverse correlation to children's learning in the early years.

Two primary factors prevent teacher turnover: wages sufficient to raise a family in the City; and job satisfaction. Teaching young children *is* rocket science, demanding a masters degree and years of experience to perform effectively. I respectfully ask the members of the Council to try it some time. Do it for a day. You will quickly understand why an early childhood teacher is entitled to a salary at least equivalent to their similarly credentialed upper grade counterparts. The two key factors in job satisfaction for early educators are respect; and the equipment, materials and supplies – the tools they need to do the job.

### **Welcoming Environment**

Second to the adults in quality early education is an appropriate environment – the environment of the school itself, and the environment in the classroom. Both must be nurturant – welcoming to children. It is well documented that this usually means small neighborhood based settings – settings where young children will not be overwhelmed by monolithic buildings and overrun by much larger, more boisterous schoolyard playmates.

The classroom should, of course, be designed to work for children individually and in small and large groups. There should be many and diverse “materials to facilitate a variety of activities – block building, dramatic play, art, music, science, math, manipulatives, quiet book reading” (NAEYC Accreditation guidelines). Similarly there must be outdoor equipment to encourage running, riding, climbing, balancing, building, throwing, bouncing, etc. All of these spaces and materials must of course be safe, durable and in good repair.

The environment should welcome families as well. This not only means an open-door policy and physical spaces where parents can feel at home, it also means a school day that accommodates the needs of working parents. And it means offering on-site or referral services to those families who need them.

### **Curriculum**

“The most important goal is to provide a curriculum that recognizes and expands your child's interests, strengths, and abilities. To do this requires paying careful attention to the fact that children learn best by being active and curious.” So say Chancellor Joel Klein and Deputy Chancellor Carmen Fariña in their booklet for parents *Welcome to Pre-K*. They go on to underscore that a curriculum for this level must address four key areas

of development – physical, socio-emotional, cognitive and creative/esthetic. The Department’s own *Prekindergarten Performance Standards*, which can be obtained by calling 212-374-0351, describe in depth the standards and indicators of a quality curriculum.

### **Health and Safety**

Quality in early education requires safe facilities – inside and out. Protection, cleanliness, hygiene and developmentally appropriate materials are all essential to quality.

### **What Is Needed**

So what will it take to gain full quality in early education? We will need more early education teachers who are knowledgeable and skilled, and more of them will need to earn salaries appropriate to their education level and talent. We will need more equipment, materials and supplies. And we will need many more appropriately sized and designed settings for young children.

Presently seventy percent of the children in Universal PreK are served in community-based organizations. Most offer the small neighborhood settings required, but few can afford living wage salaries for their teachers. Public schools pay better salaries, but have fewer settings that reach out to young children and their families. The blend of services that the Department of Education has provided through schools *and* CBO’s has, on balance, worked well for all involved; but both need bolstering.

To insure that the components of quality are met and that our city truly reaps long term benefits *for children, for families and for our future*, it is essential that a significant portion of the annual and the capital funding, which the city will receive as a result of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity process, goes to serve the needs of three and four-year-olds.

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