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# *Committee Meeting*

of

## SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

*“The Committee will receive testimony from invited speakers regarding preschool mixed-delivery systems”*

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**LOCATION:** Committee Room 4  
State House Annex  
Trenton, New Jersey

**DATE:** June 3, 2024  
11:00 a.m.

### **MEMBERS OF COMMITTEE PRESENT:**

Senator Vin Gopal, Chair  
Senator Shirley K. Turner, Vice Chair  
Senator Angela V. McKnight  
Senator M. Teresa Ruiz  
Senator Kristin M. Corrado  
Senator Owen Henry



### **ALSO PRESENT:**

Amanda Bastelica  
Jacquelyn N. Corsentino  
*Office of Legislative Services*  
*Committee Aides*

Aislinn Brennan  
*Senate Majority*  
*Committee Aide*

Christine Dobisch  
*Senate Republican*  
*Committee Aide*

***Meeting Recorded and Transcribed by***  
The Office of Legislative Services, Public Information Office,  
Hearing Unit, State House Annex, PO 068, Trenton, New Jersey

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Vin Gopal  
Chair

Shirley K. Turner  
Vice-Chair

Angela V. McKnight  
Kristin M. Corrado  
Owen Henry



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**COMMITTEE NOTICE**

TO: MEMBERS OF THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

FROM: SENATOR VIN GOPAL, CHAIRMAN

SUBJECT: COMMITTEE MEETING - JUNE 3, 2024

*The public may address comments and questions to Amanda Bastelica, Jacquelyn N. Corsentino, Committee Aides, or make bill status and scheduling inquiries to Marguerite Tazza, Secretary, at (609)847-3850, fax (609)984-9808, or e-mail: [OLSAideSED@njleg.org](mailto:OLSAideSED@njleg.org). Written and electronic comments, questions and testimony submitted to the committee by the public, as well as recordings and transcripts, if any, of oral testimony, are government records and will be available to the public upon request.*

The Senate Education Committee will meet on Monday, June 3, 2024 at 11:00 AM in Committee Room 4, 1st Floor, State House Annex, Trenton, New Jersey.

The committee will receive testimony from invited speakers regarding preschool mixed-delivery systems.

Issued 5/24/24

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**SENATOR VIN GOPAL (Chair):** Good morning.

Sorry to keep everyone waiting.

June 3, Senate Education Committee meeting.

If we can get a roll call, please?

**MS. BASTELICA:** Senator Henry.

**SENATOR HENRY:** Here.

**MS. BASTELICA:** Is present.

Senator Corrado.

**SENATOR CORRADO:** Here.

**MS. BASTELICA:** Is present.

Senator McKnight.

**SENATOR McKNIGHT:** Here.

**MS. BASTELICA:** Is present.

Senator Turner.

**SENATOR SHIRLEY K. TURNER (Vice Chair):** Here.

**MS. BASTELICA:** Is present.

Senator Gopal.

**SENATOR GOPAL:** Here.

**MS. BASTELICA:** Is present.

Also in attendance is Senator Ruiz.

**SENATOR GOPAL:** Start with the Pledge of Allegiance.

(Pledge of Allegiance is recited)

**SENATOR GOPAL:** OK, thank you, everyone. Thank you, Majority Leader Ruiz, for joining.

This Committee today is going to receive testimony from invited speakers regarding preschool mixed-delivery system. A mixed-delivery

preschool system is a model of early childhood education, where different types of providers collaborate to offer public preschool services in a variety of settings. The intent of this hearing is to learn about the benefits of and the barriers to mixed-delivery preschool systems.

The Commissioner of the Children and Families and the Acting Commissioner of Education have both provided written testimony to the Committee, which is included in the members' packets. The Department of Education also provided its 2024 report to the State Legislature on preschool expansion and mixed delivery that was submitted to the Legislature in March.

I want to thank Acting Commissioner Dehmer. We've had some really good conversations since he took over a couple of months back on this issue that has been very important to a lot of folks in my district.

So, why don't we bring up first to testify the National Institute of Early Education Research, Karin Garver, Early Childhood Education Policy Specialist. And, also, with the Early Care and Education Consortium, Elsa Jacobsen, Director of State Policy and Government Affairs. And, Rashanna Yusuf, District Leader for KinderCare.

If the three of you can please come up?

Thank you.

Just state your name into the record, position, and feel free to give your testimony.

**KARIN GARVER:** Sure.

Good morning, and thank you so much for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today.

**SENATOR GOPAL:** Hold on one second, I think the mic's not on, is it?

MS. GARVER: OK.

Good morning again, and thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today.

I am Karin Garver, and I am an Early Childhood Policy Specialist at the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University.

One of the hallmarks of New Jersey's high-quality preschool program is our mixed-delivery model, where children are served in public school settings as well as in private provider settings, which include Head Start and childcare providers.

Regardless of where State-funded preschoolers are served, participating providers are required to meet the same standards of quality. Which is why, when NIEER evaluated the Abbott Preschool Program in the mid-2000s, we found that private providers had similar and, in some classrooms, even higher quality than their contracting school districts.

However, school districts and private providers must receive adequate funding to meet the State's high standards, and the programs-per-child rates are currently too low. NIEER estimates that at least a 10% increase in current per-child rates is necessary to ensure that program standards are met across all settings.

To reach universal access to State-funded preschool, NIEER estimates that we'll need to incorporate 7,000 more classrooms into our program. Utilizing a mixed-delivery model offers the fastest and least expensive route to universal public preschool, because it maximizes the use of existing resources such as classroom space and experienced program staff. Without a robust mixed-delivery system, we are unlikely to achieve universal access to public preschool in New Jersey.

The Abbott Districts are required, through New Jersey Supreme Court mandate, to maintain a mixed-delivery model by contracting with all willing and able private providers when space isn't available in school districts. However, the decision does not apply to other school districts in the State. And, as a result, we've documented a significant decline in the percentage of children in contracted centers.

In the '05-'06 school year, 57% of New Jersey's public preschoolers were served by private providers -- and, it was 67% in the Abbott Districts alone. But, by the '21-'22 school year, almost 63% of State-funded preschool seats were in public school settings, and just 37% in private provider settings. Outside of the Abbott Districts, just 16% of seats are estimated to be in private provider settings.

Over the past several years, NIEER has facilitated conversations with hundreds of school districts and private providers to discuss the expansion of public preschool. Districts not yet participating in the preschool program said that two of the biggest barriers to the participation was a lack of available space and their reluctance to contract with private providers. Without a requirement that all school districts work with willing and able private providers, NIEER estimates that the percentage of children served in provider locations will continue to decline. The goal of universal preschool will be left unmet, and the overall availability of childcare will continue to decline.

Finally, both school districts and private providers have expressed concerns about the risk of participating in the State preschool program without legislation, memorializing the program as an official part of New Jersey's public education system. School districts and private providers

are looking for a signal that New Jersey's public preschool program is here to stay. And, until they see that signal, many will continue to opt out of the program and many children will go unserved.

Thank you so much again for the opportunity to testify this morning. I am happy to answer any questions.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you, Karin.

I have a few -- me and my colleagues do -- but let's wait until all three of you go if that's OK.

Go ahead.

**E L S A J A C O B S E N:** Good morning.

My name is Elsa Jacobsen, and I serve as the Director of State Government Relations for the Early Care & Education Consortium, or ECEC.

ECEC is a national nonprofit alliance of licensed childcare providers, state childcare associations, and education service providers. In New Jersey specifically, our members operate 355 centers, employ over 8,600 educators and staff; and have the capacity to serve over 53,800 children. Seven of our member companies participate in New Jersey State Preschool Program, and many also participate in the preschool programs of other states.

Since 2018, the Governor and the Legislature have increased preschool funding by over \$427 million, and added more than 14,600 childcare spaces -- preschool spaces, I'm sorry. Given the significant investment and the potential impact on both preschool providers and families, it's important to consider how preschool services are being delivered. We believe -- and, we understand that the Administration shares this view -- that providing preschool through a mixed-delivery model, one that includes *both* community-based providers and the public schools, is the best and most

effective way to deliver preschool. And, as my colleague mentioned, community-based providers can include, for example, Head Start programs and centers.

Including community-based providers helps leverage existing infrastructure -- physical infrastructure that's purpose-built for young children and human infrastructure, the educators who are trained to work with preschoolers. Including these providers also expands options for families and helps ensure that they can select a high-quality program that meets their needs. It's noteworthy that community-based providers often have programs that cover all working hours, and operate during the summer. And, they already have relationships with families because they serve younger children.

As my colleague mentioned, while New Jersey provides districts the option to contract with community-based providers to offer preschool, most districts are not required to do so, and it's noteworthy that failing to sufficiently invest in mixed-delivery can cause negative, unintended consequences. For example, if State pre-K is offered solely or mostly through public schools and community-based providers lose 4-year-olds to these programs, they may struggle to keep their classrooms open and to serve remaining families in their care. And, we're seeing these effects in New Jersey.

In order to make childcare budgets work, tuition is needed from 3- and 4-year-old classrooms to help offset the cost of care for infants and toddlers. It's more expensive to provide care for younger children due to required lower adult-child ratios, and it's often difficult for families to cover the full cost of this care. So, ultimately, when providers lose 4-year-olds, they may have to raise tuition of remaining families.

It's noteworthy that in recent months, New Jersey has made some progress towards advancing mixed delivery. For example, language included in the FY24 budget require districts to show, in their preschool education aid applications, due diligence -- that they had sought to establish partnerships with *all* licensed childcare providers in their communities who were willing and able to meet preschool program requirements. And, ultimately, 19 out of 39 district applications -- almost half -- included plans to partner with community-based providers. That is certainly progress.

With this progress, however, more mixed-delivery partnerships could be developed. According to a 2024 report on mixed-delivery by the New Jersey Department of Education, out of 283 districts that are participating in the State's preschool program, 90 -- or just under 32% -- are partnering with community-based providers. And, I think we can do better. In addition, entering into partnerships could be made more palatable for both community-based providers and school districts. And, I know that some of my colleagues today will be talking about some of the solutions that we want to bring to you for how to make that happen.

Finally -- and, I think this is an important point -- with 70% of New Jersey children under the age of 6 who have all available parents in the workforce, it is clear that more full-day, full-year pre-K options are needed, and community-based providers can help fulfill this need.

I would now like to introduce you to one of ECEC's members, Rashanna Yusuf, from KinderCare Learning Companies. And, she'll be speaking to you about her experience working with the Medford Township School District to provide preschool services.

And, I am also happy to answer any questions at the conclusion of the panel.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thanks.

RASHANNA YUSUF: Good morning.

My name is Rashanna Yusuf; I am the District Leader representing KinderCare Learning Companies. We have 45 childcare centers in 82 before- and after-school programs called Champions. We serve nearly 9,500 children in New Jersey and employ nearly 1,400 high-quality educators.

I myself have been working in early childhood education for seven years, and in my personal capacity at KinderCare, I oversee seven childcare centers, including two publicly-funded classrooms with the Medford Township School District. We plan on opening in the fall in 2024 another six classrooms that I will also support. My comments today will focus on the two classrooms that we operate in partnership with Medford Township and the six others we plan to open this fall.

From day one, Medford was interested in partnering with community-based childcare, recognizing the experience we have in running pre-K programs, the specialized facilities, and the full-day -- full-year care we offer families. Which, we know is in high demand from parents.

Our existing pre-K classrooms were under-utilized at this time, and this was a perfect match to use community assets most effectively and efficiently. To begin the program, we did not have a teacher who met the pre-K credentialing requirements, which included the P-3 certificate. As such, Medford helped us recruit a qualified candidate to be the lead teacher. Additionally, the district is offering all professional development, training,

and assessments to be used in the classroom. This has been critical to support high-quality instruction and further forge our partnership with the district.

Overall, the program is run very smoothly -- especially for our parents who were able to transition seamlessly from our privately-run pre-K into our publicly-funded program. They're, of course, enjoying the significant cost savings, but also appreciate the continuity of care that their children are experiencing. This also gives them a greater connection with the district too, as their child graduates from KinderCare, from our program, into kindergarten.

As for lessons learned and areas for improvement, I will highlight four challenges we have encountered.

While the districts have largely been receptive to partnership conversations, it is important to note that nearly all communications have been initiated by KinderCare. We wish the outreach was more bi-directional with the districts.

A few partnerships with the districts have fallen through due to strict facility requirements. For example, we have one classroom that meets all the specifications except that they are 690 square feet, which falls short of (indiscernible) short of being able to access facility waiver. I will stress that this classroom meets all licensing requirements, and ought to be considered for the preschool program as well. Simply put, if a classroom is approved to serve a low-income child through the State subsidy program, it should be suitable for a pre-K program that aims to reach most 3- and 4-year-olds.

One district will only partner with us if we could provide a minimum of four pre-K classrooms -- with only one center in their attendance zone, this was impossible, as our centers typically only run two pre-K

classrooms per location. Meeting this district's standards will require converting infant and/or toddler rooms into preschool classrooms, which will degrade the commitment we made to serving families and communities. It is abundantly clear that infant-toddler care is the most expensive and acutely challenging from (indiscernible). So, it is essential to preserve New Jersey's infant-toddler capacity.

Lastly, such partnerships take significant time, energy, and investment to start up. While we see the benefits, we are concerned about the longevity given the single-year contracting. Additional assurance through multi-year contracts will alleviate the risk involved with starting these programs, and will only encourage more community-based programs to open.

In closing, I would like to thank the committees, in coordination with the administration, for the commitment-expanding access to high-quality preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds across the state.

And, thank you for the opportunity to discuss New Jersey's mixed-delivery preschool system and the preschool expansion efforts that I have been a part of throughout this past year.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you, all.

You kind of answered the first question I had -- if the Legislature sought to codify a universal preschool, what are some of the suggestions? And, I think those are a lot of the ones I've been hearing locally, in addition to where the restroom facilities may be located, and a lot of other very rigid guidelines that make it hard.

Right now, the State of New Jersey spends about \$1.2 billion a year on this program; 283 out of the 572 districts are part of it. This might not be a question for you guys, maybe it is. Do you think there are any ways

-- the biggest concern for me is putting small businesses out, that's why I've been critical of this program and the acceleration of -- whether it's KinderCare or Goddard or Light Bridge, or any of them -- the restrictions it's had and how difficult. And, that's why I really tried to be aggressive with the Governor's Administration on changing course. And, I am hopeful with the new Commissioner that some of those things may happen.

But, do you see any opportunities where money could be saved? Not just on efficiencies -- obviously, we're speaking efficiencies. If we-- If, as-is, we stayed as-is, I mean, we're probably looking at another billion dollars if we wanted to try to do this across the entire state, which is obviously very, very expensive. Are there areas that you see, not just efficiency-wise, but they could actually save taxpayers money along the way?

MS. GARVER: And, save taxpayers money in addition to families not having to spend the tuition that they would have to spend to send their children to school--

SENATOR GOPAL: By pushing it to a more -- partnering with more small businesses; partnering with more nonprofits; partnering with more organizations and trying to set up an entire new operation in a public school setting.

MS. GARVER: Yes, I mean, I think the efficiencies really is the biggest piece. We're looking at taking advantage of the existing infrastructure in our state -- not building new facilities when facilities already exist -- where children are actually already being served in many of these childcare providers. It's just a matter of trying to incorporate the State's preschool program into programs that already exist, and then taking stock of where we might still have some gaps in different parts of the state.

SENATOR GOPAL: So, maybe for the Committee, we're trying to-- If you could walk us through. You have a location in a town; let's say one of your school districts want to partner with a KinderCare, and they want to create a mixed-delivery system. What does that process look like from day one to the end?

MS. YUSUF: So, the first step, they want to make sure that we are able to meet the requirements. So, we partner with our facilities and their team to come through, make sure we have a bathroom in the classroom.

Square footage is the big thing. So, I know for our Medford classroom -- Medford center -- we had two classrooms that were beyond what they needed. So, if we do have to open -- if we do have to do any type of construction, which I do have to do in three of my other schools, they will let us know if we're short by 10, 15--

SENATOR GOPAL: So, are you doing the application process in partnership with the public school district, or are they doing it, getting the funds, and then finding it?

MS. JACOBSEN: So, ideally, what needs to happen is that a school district and a community-based provider would connect once -- well, ideally, before the preschool expansion aid application process is open -- and then they would jointly put together an application.

And, to that point, one of the recommendations that we have is that the preschool application process be open sooner. Typically, districts and providers only have a little more than a month to put together the application, and that can certainly limit partnerships. I think, to your point about fostering more partnerships, one of the recommendations that we have is to require a certain percentage of new PEA funding to go to districts who

commit to partner with community-based providers. We think that kind of incentive is really important.

And, I will say, anecdotally, we polled our providers last year during the PEA application process and asked, "To what degree are you reaching out to providers, or to what degree are they liaising to you?" And, there was certainly some back and forth, but it was more the case that our providers were reaching out to districts. And, so we think that more -- more of that communication needs to happen, and one of the things that the State could do would be potentially to set up some roundtables, specifically for superintendents, and bring community-based providers and districts who are doing this well and have had success to the table to share how they've put together those partnerships as examples to highlight for the rest of the State.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

And, I know in my district we have the Superintendent of Tinton Falls, who is going to come up a little later, who wants to do this in her district; has community partners who want to, and they're still not able to do it.

So, do any of the members have any questions?

Senator Ruiz.

SENATOR RUIZ: Thank you, Chairman, for holding this meeting.

Thank you to all the providers who are here today.

And, just a big shout out to NIEER.

You know, we're talking about something that is critically needed, but we're acting as if the State hasn't done it before. And, when the Abbott decision was struck -- precisely the issues that we're talking about

today -- facilities; growing an employee base; retaining them; collaboration between districts. Because when the courts came out and said, "Hey, Abbott Districts, you must provide this by a given time," the State rolled up their sleeves, full on, we collaborated with the community colleges and the four-year institutions, we grew the paraprofessionals, we created the certification processes.

We need to just roll up our sleeves and do the exact same thing again. And, what has happened is -- and, it's unintended consequences in certain circumstances -- you get a new facility in a school district, a new building, didn't have four classrooms before for early childhood; now they have four additional classrooms. Nobody realized that those four classrooms takes away from the private provider that perhaps is just two doors down. And, we're not saying, "Don't grow new school buildings with early childhood classrooms," because nothing is greater than having a parent just drop off all kids at one specific location.

This is about making life in New Jersey easier for the workforce, so that the equation of success for economic development continues to exist.

And, we need a Department of Early Childhood-- Chairman, you asked the question, "What did they make you go through?" Everyone in this room can attest, they go through every single department in the State -- Treasury, DCA, DCF, DOE, what else am I missing? DOH, DHS. You probably do not go to DMV--

(laughter)

SENATOR RUIZ: --that's probably the only one that you don't go to -- unless we start doing early CDL licenses for 3-year-olds.

And, so, just having a concentrated approach in one unit so it's easier; so that it's faster; that it's collaborative. And, then, really setting the framework for policy, for districts to understand that this is a growing new space. They recognize it as well, but then they have to work alongside the private provider who has been doing it for over two decades in a municipality when everybody thought it was babysitting, and we knew that it was right level-setting the field for a child to begin kindergarten.

But, I just want to say thank you to all of you, and it's about how much are we going to lean into this space. Because, just because of-- Everybody knows it, for every dollar we put into this-- And, I don't even want to call it preschool anymore. We have to really focus on early childhood delivery, whether that's a 3-month-old or it's a 5-year-old in that space. Because, we can't continue to just roll out universal preschool when we have districts like in certain areas. I suspect Trenton falls under the same thing. We have high-quality early childhood 3 and 4 providers. When it comes to infant and early toddler care, there is nowhere for you to take your child, or, it is just extremely expensive; or, you have a workforce -- predominantly of women of color -- who are getting paid, and because the Federal property level is still so low that then *they* don't qualify for programs for parents and can't send their children to the same space.

So, we have bills that I think we need to ramp up and get done. But, we have to be honest about it and just-- I think everyone is there, I just think we need to-- And, I am so grateful that you are doing this today, because it elevates the conversation for the need in a business setting. This isn't solely about the development of the child; this is about what New Jersey needs to do for our families.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you, Senator.

Any questions?

Senator Corrado.

SENATOR CORRADO: Thank you, Chairman.

And, thank you to everybody who is here today. I think it is a really important conversation, and I'm glad we're having it.

I am disappointed that neither of the commissioners are here from the two departments, though. I think they should be a part of the conversation, as well as hearing what's being said at the table. So, in the future, I would hope that they would be present.

I just want to be clear as we're having the conversation, because I noticed that you are interchanging childcare and preschool as you're talking. So, I just want to be clear on what the emphasis is on today; if it's providing both, then that's fine. But, what are the standards, as well, that we're looking to -- across the spectrum -- implement?

And, I do think it's important, that we already have providers who do a phenomenal job, and that they should be incorporated into the practice.

MS. GARVER: Thank you for asking that question, because it is complicated, and there are-- We do interchange a lot of terms.

I think the bottom line, as Senator Ruiz just mentioned that this isn't just about State-funded preschool. It's about the continuum of care, because State-funded preschool doesn't just impact 3- and 4-year-olds, it impacts the provision of care for children from birth through probably the age 13 and beyond.

I think, here, we're talking about the impact of mixed delivery on the State-funded preschool program, but you can't talk about the impact of State preschool and mixed-delivery without also talking about the impact on the broader childcare community.

So, apologies for that, that combining of terms, because it really is very difficult to pull them apart because they're so connected to each other.

MS. JACOBSEN: And, I would just add, too, that for many of our providers, they're not just serving preschool-age children, 3- and 4-year-olds. So, when we say, "a childcare provider," they could be serving children up to the age of 12 but largely children 0-5. So, that's part of the reason you hear kind of the confluence of preschool and childcare.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

Senator Turner.

SENATOR TURNER: Yes, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

This is a critically important hearing that we're having today. Because we all know that the money we spend on the front end of life is going to save a lot more on the back end of life. And, the sooner that we get to these young children, the better. Because preschool is very, very important. Their brains are like sponges. They absorb so much early in life.

And, they do need this head start, so to speak, particularly in our Abbott Districts. Because so often, from talking to teachers who are teaching in kindergarten, they indicate that so many of these kids are coming to school not knowing their colors or their alphabet or their numbers. And, they're not getting the preschool that they should be to prepare them for kindergarten. And, they could learn so much during those early years so that when they do go to kindergarten and elementary, primary school, they can hit the ground

running and not be behind. Because it's going to cost as much more in remediation with these young children if we *don't* get to them earlier.

Now, I have a question regarding teaching -- teachers. We know that throughout K-12, we have a severe teacher shortage. Are you experiencing any teacher shortage in your program?

MS. YUSUF: Yes, we're experiencing the same thing as the school districts are experiencing when it comes to -- not even just for the universal preschool, but also for our regular staffing needs in the centers.

SENATOR TURNER: Do you have any idea as to why you're experiencing a teacher shortage, and what we can do in order to relieve that situation?

I know that I have been told that there's a pay inequity as well as benefits inequities. So, can you tell me more about that, how it affects your children?

MS. YUSUF: Yes. I think the biggest thing is wage for early childhood educators. It makes it very difficult to bring them on, and they're making a little bit more than minimum wage, but where it's supposed to -- we're given this high-quality education, but they're not getting the benefits of the wage for it. So, it's been very difficult.

And, we'll have some that come on and realize it's a lot more than they thought it would be, and that also affects the turnover of our staff in our building.

SENATOR TURNER: Have you also been-- Go ahead.

MS. GARVER: I just wanted to mention that one of the hallmarks -- one of the other hallmarks of our State-funded preschool program is the requirement that teachers in the State-funded preschool

program are paid comparably to teachers who -- are in private provider settings are paid comparably to teachers who are in public school settings.

But, within that, I also want to acknowledge that, one, right now our per-child rates aren't supporting that policy. And, so, many of our private providers are struggling to pay their teachers what they're supposed to be paying them based on the State preschool program. And, the current per-child rates don't allow private providers to provide comparable benefits to their teachers. So, we see a lot of teachers in private provider settings being lost to school district settings because the pay and the benefits are much more attractive in school district settings.

So, there are other complicating factors to this issue as well that are worth thinking about as we're thinking about the expansion of the program.

MS. JACOBSEN: And, I would just note, to your question, there is certainly a national challenge -- a state-by-state challenge with both childcare and preschool provider wages, such that, really, in states across the country, we're seeing childcare providers lose their well-trained staff to fast food chains, to retail jobs, where folks can make a little bit more and, in many cases, work fewer hours.

And, so, that's why it's so important that the reimbursement rates for preschool are strong, so that staff can be recruited or retained.

SENATOR TURNER: Thank you.

The other concern I have is the high chronic absentee rate, as it affects the K-12 students. Does this exist in preschool as well, students not showing up regularly?

MS. JACOBSEN: I don't know that we've seen that as much, but I will say that, typically, there is fluctuation in the early years because children get sick; there are multiple things that happen.

So, typically, most programs are not at 100% enrollment every day of the week. There are certain things that -- certain instances that happen where children are not -- that cause children not to be there every single day. But, I don't know that I would say we're seeing chronic large-scale absences. I think that was certainly the case during the pandemic; I think we're coming back.

MS. GARVER: I think one other piece of the program is something that the Department of Education asks school districts to incorporate within their State-funded preschool programs, is helping to educate parents about the importance of bringing their child to the preschool program every day, and, so, sort of starting that routine from a very young age that school is important and attending school every day is important. So, that's one other aspect that's important to mention.

SENATOR GOPAL: Any other questions?

Senator.

SENATOR TURNER: In talking to kindergarten teachers, they say it was a big problem in our urban districts, getting the students to come to school every day or not be chronically absent. And, it seems to be prevalent throughout the state. And, we know there's -- from the data -- there's a strong correlation between absenteeism and achievement, in terms of the test scores.

So, if the child is not in the classroom, they are not learning. And, do you have any idea what causes children not to come to school as regularly as some of the suburban students do?

MS. GARVER: I can say anecdotally, I remember -- this is going back in time a bit -- I remember the Camden School District found that they had some students who weren't showing up to school, and they actually had some teams of people deployed out to households just to knock on doors and ask what was going on; if everything was OK; if there were reasons why.

And, it was everything from families who didn't have enough money to run the laundry cycle and send their kids to school with clean clothes, and didn't want to send them, to families who maybe didn't understand the importance of showing up every day to preschool. So, it really ran the gamut.

But, I think particularly in our lower-income areas, it can be some of these basic everyday necessities that keep families from sending their children to school.

SENATOR TURNER: Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

Thank you; are you guys good?

Thank you all very much.

Next up, let's bring up Louise McCants, CEO of the Capital Area YMCA; and, Bonnie Eggenberg, President of New Jersey Head Start.

Whoever would like to start, sure.

State your name, position for the record please.

**L O U I S E M c C A N T S:** Good morning, good morning.

My name is Louise McCants; I am the CEO of the Capital Area YMCA, located right here in Trenton, New Jersey.

Thank you for allowing me to speak today, because I want to let you all know that for the last 20 years, what Senator Ruiz was talking about

when the State rolled up their sleeves when the Abbott v. Burke decision came down, our Capital Area Y was operating a preschool program since 1986. But, when that decision came down, there was an opportunity to partner with our local school district, Trenton Public Schools. And, so, for the last two decades, we've been partnering with the Trenton Public Schools to provide four classrooms for our 3- and 4-year-olds of free early childhood education.

And, one of the great things about being a partner with our Trenton Public Schools, of course we're a community-based organization. We have programs to support our families so that our 3- and 4-year-olds can have before care and after care, so that we support the working families. And, then, also, we have preschool for what we call our littles. So, we have preschool in the summer -- preschool summer camp -- that also continues to support the families all year long.

One of the challenges that we face is working with the school district, which I love. I am a product of Trenton Public Schools; I am a product of going to early Head Start. And, I know these programs work. But, one of the challenges now, being a CEO of this business, is knowing that the funding is not always sufficient to fully support the program. Yes, the teachers-- We do have certified teachers who get paid as much as the Trenton School District teachers get paid, but there is not enough operational cost to support that, which Karin talked a bit about benefits and such, that we can compete with some of these school districts to offer the program -- *quality* programs that we do offer and pay our teachers the same amount of rates.

We do make ourselves -- our Capital Area YMCA-- One of our strategic plans is to make ourselves employer of choice. And, because we offer

such great programs to these 3- and 4-year-olds, we also want to retain a great staff and those teachers who are giving them that great start to being lifelong learners, and that's what we aim to do. So, at our Y, we have the benefit of seeing our kids not only go to our preschool program starting at 3 years old, they stay within our Y and they come all the way, all the way until they become youth workers. We've seen some of our babies -- our little babies from 3 years old -- grow up to then be colleagues and work at the YMCA. That's the benefit of having a community-based organization partner, that you get to have complete engagement with the children.

And, Senator Turner, one of the great things, too, is being able to work with the parents; provide workshops to make it important that they know that starting the preschool program at 3 or 4 years old for the children will make them lifelong learners and make them want to go to school so that the absenteeism is not a crisis in fifth grade. And, I do understand and am very much aware of that, and we try to make sure that our parents know that. And, the great thing is, we don't have a problem with our 3- and 4-year-olds arriving to school, because we do-- We make sure that the importance is there.

I also want to just highlight that our Trenton-- It was formerly known as Trenton Family YMCA, but we became the Capital Area YMCA because we expand outside of our Trenton area base. So, right now, we serve Trenton, Lawrence, and Ewing. And, we're working with Lawrence School District, who just received money for preschool expansion to provide some before and after care for their preschool programs as they continue to elevate their classrooms. Because we have the experience, of course, of working with our preschool after-school program and before care. They look to us right

away and said, “Hey, you’re already in our schools providing after-school program, before and after care, to our K through fifth grade; why not now do it also for our preschool program?” And, we’re working with them right now so that we can give those parents that support of being able to have their children have full-day school, of course, and then after school, so that they can continue to work. Because it does matter. If we take care of our children right now, we will definitely reap the benefits of -- I’m sure, I know I’ve seen it, and I’m sure a lot of you have all seen it -- that people, the young people do become lifelong learners and then become productive, productive citizens, and really take care of our state as they grow older.

So, giving them this early childhood education is essential to everyone. I mean, I’m part of an Abbott -- former Abbott school district -- and knows what the equity involved that made. And, it is also needed in other places, too, and that’s why Capital Area YMCA and YMCA Alliance of New Jersey supports the UPK program.

**BONNIE EGGENBERG:** Good afternoon.

I’m Bonnie Eggenberg, President of the New Jersey Head Start Association.

And, I have with me this afternoon my colleague, Amanda Colon, who is the Vice President of the Association.

The Head Start programs of New Jersey have been part of the very widely successful mixed-delivery system since its inception as a result of the Abbott decision. In those early years, programs benefited from the support to assist their teachers with completing college degrees as well as the preschool-through-third-grade teaching certificates, contributing to the growth and quality for the entire early childhood community.

While Head Start programs bring more than \$215 million in Federal funding to serve infants and toddlers -- the majority of which goes to preschool slots -- staff in these mixed-delivery system classrooms benefit from higher salaries and better benefits. In addition, as a result of the mixed-delivery system model, staff, families, and children have benefited from far greater access to learning materials, therapeutic services such as speech therapy, and continuity in learning, as children, along with their parents, transition from preschool to district kindergartens.

In later years under the State-funded preschool regulations, the work between school districts and Head Start programs has expanded. While there have been ups and downs in regard to successfully partnering between Head Start and school districts, the New Jersey Head Start Association wants to thank the New Jersey Department of Education for their strong work in supporting successful partnerships. And, the Association also wants to thank you for your continued support of preschool expansion and the mixed-delivery system model.

The New Jersey Head Start Association proposes the following improvements to the system that will assist in removing unnecessary barriers. **A M A N D A W O R T H - C O L O N:** So, the current allocation of preschool resources throughout New Jersey does not effectively ensure pay equity, which is fundamental to building a highly qualified early learning workforce.

Although the intent of the New Jersey Supreme Court in Abbott, and subsequent DOE regulations, require parity between preschool programs, such parity is rarely achieved. With far fewer dollars than our public school partners for salaries and benefits, our ability to hire and retain qualified staff

remains extremely challenging. Our staff also has difficulty passing the praxis, which is a requirement for P3 teachers. This is especially true for staff who are English language learners, whose first language is not English, and we suggest offering something like a portfolio process or something similar, where staff could show their ability to work without passing the praxis.

The current -- sorry. This has been even more problematic since the onslaught of COVID-19, as existing and potential employees now have competing job opportunities, including employment with the school districts directly engaged in preschool expansion, many of which are working to increase pay rates for teachers.

The current per-child cost does not take into account the salaries needed to recruit and retain teachers, as the rate does not increase to support teachers who have several years of experience and are higher on the district pay scales. In addition, the benefits offered through State pension and health programs are generally far more attractive to teachers than what a Head Start program is able to offer. The per-child cost rate *must* be increased to narrow the gap between what Head Start receives and what school districts receive for their preschool classrooms. This funding also allows us to hire family advocates; and our family advocates are our main support in preventing the absenteeism that was discussed by the last participant.

MS. EGGENBERG: Current policies and contract structures are not sufficient to ensure that all of our preschool children thrive in safe and healthy learning environments with the most cost-effective use of resources possible.

We agree with NIEER and our other colleagues in terms of the recommendations regarding facilities, and we really support the idea that

space waivers are more fully granted or it is codified to ensure that the same space that is required for Head Start, required through the Office of Licensing, is required as part of this mixed-delivery model.

In addition, contract terms between school districts and Head Start providers need to be extended from a one-year to a five-year contract, with an option for an additional five-year renewal, enabling providers to achieve savings by negotiating long-term leases with landlords, or obtaining bank loans to purchase or renovate facilities.

MS. WORTH-COLON: Today, resources are not strategically invested throughout the entire system of early childhood education in a manner that promotes quality education while building the overall capacity for future pre-K expansion.

New Jersey Head Start Association believes that the flow of funding and other resources must be holistically, intentionally, and strategically directed throughout the entire system of early childhood education if we are to achieve the long-term goal of universal pre-K for all New Jersey children and families. We therefore advocate for legislative, regulatory, and policy changes that will provide ample opportunity and equitable funding directly from the State to Head Start agencies, which play a significant role in pre-K expansion -- particularly in communities where school districts are not already partnering or accessing these resources. This approach will help alleviate inconsistent and/or underfunding of Head Start agencies receiving State resources by ensuring comparable funding per-child across the entire system of preschool services.

In addition, this process would give Head Start agencies access to unspent funds to roll over as school districts are authorized to do, provided there is a prudent plan for utilizing these funds in the future.

MS. EGGENBERG: New Jersey's system of early childhood education does not currently provide equitable access to the best quality services for all of our children. The New Jersey Association members are united in our passion for overcoming racial inequities and the destructive forces of poverty. We believe that equity can only be achieved when all preschool children, regardless of where they go to school, have access to the same high-quality learning experiences wrapped in comprehensive services, which alleviate chronic absenteeism. Those comprehensive services are designed to improve the quality of life for all of the family.

The New Jersey Head Start Association strongly advocates for State mandates for ensuring all districts partner with Head Start programs, including creating equal access to State-funded early childhood education services for all eligible children, available through the local school districts, including Title I funds intended to support at-risk children served by Head Start. This includes mandating automatic preschool eligibility and referral to Head Start for all of New Jersey's vulnerable children, including those with disabilities, in foster care, in kinship care, or experiencing homelessness -- as well as ensuring funding and resources for those children is available to Head Start programs.

A per-child funding model to share resources equitably with Head Start providers for case management, transportation, and other supportive services to which vulnerable children and families are categorically eligible, is essential for making a difference in the lives of children.

Thank you, and we are available for any questions.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

Senator McKnight.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Thank you, Chairman.

Thanks for putting this together.

And, thank you so much for coming here today. And, to the previous speakers, thank you so much.

I have a couple of questions. Can you share what are the children learning to be prepared both (indiscernible)?

MS. EGGENBERG: So, Head Start really takes a look at what are, first, that foundational skills that children need. And, a lot of that is that social-emotional learning. Because, if you cannot work cooperatively with your peers, then the ability to learn is severely inhibited.

But, we also look at children's enthusiasm for learning: that inquiry; that being able to explore; to ask scientific questions. We look at math skills; we look at literacy skills. Children are learning about books and reading and the joy of experiencing learning through all the materials that are in their classroom.

All of Head Start, but particularly those who work in those mixed-delivery system models, we use a research-based validated curriculum. Our particular program primarily uses creative curriculum. And, those children then are assessed three times a year to ensure that they are meeting those expectations and progressing towards success in kindergarten.

MS. McCANTS: She just said the magic word, "creative curriculum."

We use that along with all the Trenton public school collaboration of the Abbott District preschool programs. We all use the creative curriculum, which is definitely inquiry-based, and it does prepare our children. They leave out learning and reading by the time they're ready for kindergarten.

So, I love the curriculum; I love that it gives the opportunity for the kids to do field trips; of learning educational enrichment; and we've seen some great things come out of that. And, we supplement it with outdoor classrooms -- an outdoor classroom for our children as well, so that they can learn as well in the environment. Even though we're in a city, we have a nice little play area that is designated for them. Every day they have to get at least an hour of outdoor learning. And, so, now we made an outdoor classroom for them as well.

So, it's-- We gotta do everything we can to prepare our kids for kindergarten.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: OK, and I have one more question.

So, the panel prior to you coming up -- and, listening to you as well -- it seems as if you're competing with the district for teachers, and competing for the children.

What are some suggestions that you have to work collaboratively?

MS. McCANTS: I don't like the word "competing." (laughter)

SENATOR McKNIGHT: I don't, I don't, but I'm hearing it.

MS. McCANTS: Me either, yes.

But, for us as the Capital Area YMCA, we collaborate. We work very closely with our district. Not only do they provide the PD -- professional

development -- for our teachers as well, so that it is a collaborative partnership, we also work with them -- with our teachers -- if we need to hire teachers as well. We do-- It's enough kids to go around, as we see it; it's more than enough. We have waiting lists at points during the school year for our children, and if we can't be able to serve them, we always point them to the next provider, because we just believe in the early education of our youth.

And, so, it's not a competing type of situation at all for us, because in the area that we serve, there is more than enough kids and the demographics show that, in a little bit, we're going to need a lot more classrooms, and this is why this is important. Because the demographics of the State, and in particular this city, Trenton -- and, I know people are talking about other places, but I'm talking about we're here where we're serving -- there is going to be a great need for more classrooms.

MS. WORTH-COLON: I would say despite our best efforts to collaborate, the bigger problem is that there aren't enough teachers. And, we really need to go back to what we did at the beginning of Abbott, and investing in that teacher preparation workforce. Because no matter what, if there aren't enough teachers to go around, it turns into a competition and we cannot -- Head Start cannot provide a pension; Head Start does not have access to State health benefits; and when it turns into a competition, we do lose staff to the district.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Thank you.

Thank you, Chairman.

SENATOR GOPAL: Do you have a specific suggestion?

One of the things you mentioned, eliminate the praxis test, Senate did that May 20; Assembly hopefully will concur and the Governor is going to sign it.

Are there other things that you haven't seen, or things that you think out of the box that would be helpful as far as bringing new graduates into the workforce and going into your sector?

MS. EGGENBERG: During the early days of Abbott -- which, Abbot was very successful, otherwise we wouldn't see what we have today -- they allowed teachers with two-year degrees to submit a plan to complete their bachelor degree within four years, and having that opportunity to grow teachers who have demonstrated high skills at that two-year level I think would also help to grow that workforce.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

Any other questions from members?

Senator Turner.

SENATOR TURNER: Yes, I would like to ask, how do your students arrive at school? Do you provide transportation? Do they walk, or do their parents bring them or their siblings?

MS. EGGENBERG: So, it varies. So, do you want to start first-

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MS. McCANTS: Oh, no, you can go first--

MS. EGGENBERG: --and we'll go down the line?

MS. McCANTS: Oh, OK.

Well, our-- We are community-based, so most of our children are either driven or walked to our location. We have two locations: One is inside of Trenton Housing Authority, and so most of those particular

students live in that housing development; and, then, we have another site at our Trenton facility in which parents can drop them off and that's where we mainly offer before care and after care. And, so, they stay there all day with us and of course the Trenton Area YMCA is a childcare (indiscernible) program, so we give them a hot meal, even, at the end of the day.

MS. EGGENBERG: So, for us -- and, we cover seven counties down in southern New Jersey -- we have a mix. In some cases, the school districts provide the transportation. In some cases we provide bus transportation. And, then, in other cases, parents either walk or carpool or drive themselves or take Uber or take cabs.

MS. WORTH-COLON: I cover two counties in the middle of the state, and I would say the same thing -- it's a mix. We don't provide any transportation ourselves. The school district-- I collaborate with eight different school districts right now, so the school districts that provide transportation provide the transportation to our students. We do have a lot of walkers, for example, in the Freehold Borough. We have to be in a location where people can walk; it's a requirement because we wouldn't get kids otherwise. And, in some places, we have a lot of families who drop off via car.

We do-- Our family advocates work really hard on social capital and making connections between parents to support each other, because transportation can be a real issue.

SENATOR TURNER: I think, from what I'm told by the kindergarten teachers, absenteeism is highest when it's raining, because the parents don't want to come out and walk their kids to school in the rain.

And, if their, I guess, transportation is always an issue no matter where it is because it's very costly as well.

But, the other question I had -- do you do anything in the way of counseling or meeting with parents to advise them of the absenteeism of their child from the classroom, and the importance of their child being there? Do you have parent-teacher conferences, so to speak?

MS. EGGENBERG: So, Head Start is based on family engagement, and we believe that parents are the child's first teacher, and so we have to make a difference with them in order for that parent to guide them, their child through, all up through high school.

And, so, yes, we do. We do home visits; we do parent-teacher conferences. We call every time a child is absent. If there is something going on with the family, we work on a plan to help that family overcome whatever obstacles are affecting their child's attendance. We've even done things such as home-based services. We had a child with cancer, and so that child received services through Facetime for a while, until his immune system was built back up and was able to come.

So, we work really hard to make sure that that child stays engaged and that family stays engaged, so that that child has a successful learning career.

MS. McCANTS: We do the same; we have a family worker who calls the parents, and we also do the parent-teacher conferences as well, along with the district. So, we do it every quarter as well to talk about their success, of course, and then any issues that may arise.

But, we do make sure the children are there daily. And, we do a great job. I mean, the great thing -- like I said, with the rain, like you were

saying about the absenteeism because of the rain, a lot of them are in short walking distance so it's not as far for them to get to our location. And, so, that's not a *big* problem of ours, but we do have a family worker in case something like that arise -- or any issue that may arise with the family. We are very supportive of all our families.

MS. WORTH-COLON: The office of Head Start actually requires us to prove that we're giving that support, so they review us every five years during our five-year grant cycle, and we are required to show our efforts around absenteeism.

SENATOR TURNER: Do you do anything in the way of making parents aware of your program so that they can take advantage of it? Because they're not required to send their kids to school unless they're 6 years old.

MS. EGGENBERG: So, we do a lot of recruitment activities. We are out at county fairs, health fairs, a variety of different fairs, letting parents know about our services and the benefit of our services.

We also go door knocking -- go to apartment buildings; go to laundromats; go to doctor's offices. So, we're constantly reaching out to the community to let them know.

We've also engaged in social media and what they call "geofencing," so that Head Start pops up on their Facebook page. Periodically we've done that as well, because we want to make sure that every parent knows that they have an opportunity to make a difference with their child's life.

MS. McCANTS: And, we-- Sorry.

MS. WORTH-COLON: Sorry.

We also recruit through our community partners. About a year ago, the Office of Head Start updated guidelines, and now any child who is eligible for SNAP is also eligible for Head Start. So, we have a really close collaboration with SNAP where they send home our flyers to all of their families so that they know that they're eligible.

MS. McCANTS: Community collaboration is very important to us at the Capital Area YMCA, and so we recruit with everyone and just make people aware.

The great thing is, there is an abundance of kids who still need to get in these programs, and so we are very actively -- always actively -- recruiting kids. And, for our summer camp, like I said, so we can support working families so that it doesn't just end when the school year ends. Their kid, 3- and 4-year-old, can get that support all year long.

SENATOR TURNER: Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: For Head Start, is there-- How many different public schools do you work with?

MS. WORTH-COLON: So, I cover Monmouth and Middlesex counties, and within those two counties we currently have eight different school district partnerships. We've had up to 13 different school district partnerships at one time.

MS. EGGENBERG: And, this coming school year for our seven-county area, we are going to be working with 11 school districts.

SENATOR GOPAL: The YMCA is one, right?

MS. McCANTS: Yes, we do Trenton Public Schools.

SENATOR GOPAL: So, for -- is there anything outside of normal human personality conflicts school district to school district -- is there

anything that you see any of your eight, or when there was 13, do really, really well that makes the partnership helpful, and others that are not?

MS. WORTH-COLON: I think the previous panelist mentioned communication, and when there is consistent two-way communication throughout the school year, that is when it works--

SENATOR GOPAL: Nothing in policy, that's all State-related? Great.

Any other questions for this panel? (no response)

Thank you, guys.

MS. McCANTS: Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Next, let's bring up-- We have a group, a larger group.

Dr. Lisa Goldey, Tinton Falls Superintendent of Schools. I apologize if I'm not saying this name right -- Andrette Maple, Program Director of It Takes a Village in Jersey City. Samantha Howard of the Bayonne Economic Opportunity Foundation, Executive Director. Noel Worthington, Director of the Wesley Nursery School in Ocean Township. And, I'm not sure if this fourth individual is here, but they were invited -- Stepping Stones Learning Institute here in Trenton.

Is Stepping Stones here? No? OK.

Why don't we start with the Superintendent.

**L I S A G O L D E Y, Ed.D.:** Hi, good morning, everyone.

SENATOR GOPAL: You've got to press your -- the button.

Yes, perfect.

DR. GOLDEY: Can you hear me now?

SENATOR GOPAL: Yes.

DR. GOLDEY: All right, great; thank you.

Good morning, everyone, and members of the Senate Education Committee.

My name is Lisa Goldey; I am the Superintendent of Schools in the Tinton Falls School District.

We are a pre-K-8 district in Monmouth County. In Tinton Falls, we educate approximately 1,400 students who live in both Tinton Falls and Shrewsbury Township.

Today, I am here to discuss preschool expansion and our attempt to implement it. I will highlight some of the barriers from a school perspective as we steer towards this preschool expansion experience. Additionally, I have included recommendations for the Committee at the end of this testimony.

As an educator with over 25 years of experience, I understand the tremendous benefit that preschool offers to our children. The research speaks to the gains that children experience when they have access to high-quality preschool programs. These advantages are far-reaching, and include lifelong benefits.

Some of my colleagues in Monmouth County have been successful with preschool expansion, and our district has qualified to apply for the preschool expansion aid for the past two years. Although we are fully committed to expanding the education of 3- and 4-year-olds, we have been met with roadblocks. As a school district, we have proactively engaged with our partners within our community, with our private providers, but unfortunately, because *we* cannot expand, we cannot engage with them to continue with the preschool expansion.

The first barrier is the number of hours that children must attend school. According to the preschool expansion aid requirements, all classes must be at least six hours long. Currently, our preschool expansion program is not. A six-hour day would require us to increase our local budget by \$500,000 in personnel costs to bring our special education programs up to the six-hour requirement. It was impossible to allocate this amount of money after experiencing over \$1 million in S2 cuts for the past several years.

The second barrier is space. Within our school district, we have no additional classroom space available and we would rely on the partnerships with our current private preschool providers to offer the true mixed-delivery model. The amount of space required for childcare centers and what is required by the preschool expansion aid are different. This eliminates many of the private centers and the opportunity to partner with these providers to provide the true mixed-delivery system.

Another barrier of ours is transportation. Our district continues to provide transportation for all students, including courtesy busing, and, to receive the preschool expansion aid, one must transport 3- and 4-year-olds, as is done for the other students. We understand that the award covers transportation costs for the first year and financial assistance is included in the transportation aid for future years. To understand what that fiscal impact would look for us, is that our current K-8 transportation costs last year were \$3.5 million. Our current aid that we receive in transportation is \$982,000, with a shortfall of \$2.5 million. We can barely fund that gap while additionally looking on the requirement to provide transportation for our preschoolers in the mixed-delivery model.

Other concerns that are directly related to offering services within a mixed-delivery model include the ability to staff programs, as well as the curriculum used. Several of our childcare facilities do not have P3 certified staff members, and many successful staff members with significant years of experience have difficulty in obtaining their certification.

Ultimately, I am offering suggestions to the Committee to help bring universal pre-K to other districts facing similar challenges. I will emphasize that flexibility is necessary to help school districts that struggle with these barriers. With some small changes, I believe that the-- I believe that preschool expansion will become more widely accepted across the state.

Flexibility is required within preschool expansions in the area of curriculum, length of day, facilities, pathways toward certification, and transportation requirements. Curriculum selection currently is reliant on one of four research-based curriculum. However, many current preschool settings are not using that curricular. Curricular alignment will take time within these settings. Allowing for a phase-in approach will provide opportunities for teachers to receive training on the new curriculum model.

Facilities. Mirror the same facility requirements for childcare centers in the preschool expansion requirement. This will allow childcare centers to become preschool classrooms in the mixed-delivery system. Our per-pupil space requirement, as referenced in the manual of requirements for childcare centers, would be inappropriate change.

Length of day. Allow for options to modify the requirement for a six-hour day. According to the New Jersey Strategic Plan for Preschool Expansion Phase One, other schools do offer universal access to preschool for less time. By allowing for potentially a five-hour day for 3- and 4-year-olds,

New Jersey would still be ahead of universal access in other states. This will allow the district to contact with employees on a part-time, eliminating the costly benefits that would need to be provided.

Pathways toward certification. Allow for a small percentage of the preschool expansion aid to help finance certification of staff members who have a degree and are willing to complete the necessary education towards preschool certification.

Transportation. The current transportation system is not effective. Our school district does not have buses, and we must contract for all transportation services. We struggle finding and funding transportation for our students in grades K-8. Eliminating this requirement and allowing it to be an option would open up more opportunities within the school district.

Many of these flexibilities are afforded to school districts within the K-12 scope, and allowing additional options to pre-K programs to get them up and running would be helpful.

I am a very proud superintendent, willing to engage with my childcare and private providers, and, with some flexibility, I can make it happen for my district and for my town.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter, and I am excited that this Committee is looking for solutions to the current difficulties that school districts are facing in implementing universal preschool programs. I look forward to seeing the progress made in this area, and ultimately being able to provide my community with these necessary services.

Thank you very much.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you, superintendent.

**A N D R E T T E F U Q U A M A P L E:** Good morning -- or, good afternoon, I'm sorry -- Senate Education Committee, fellow educators, and those who support early childhood.

My name is Andrette Fuqua Maple, and I am the Program Director at It Takes a Village infantile or preschool center, located in the Greenville section of Jersey City.

Behind me, we have the Director of Nutrition, Peter Maple, and in the audience -- and, I'm sorry, he's also the Director of Hiring and Retention -- and, in the back, there's also the CEO who started the company. And, we are in our 26<sup>th</sup> year.

We were a part of the first phase of mixed-delivery, and that was with the Abbott v. Burke ruling. With the Abbott v. -- sorry -- Abbott v. Burke ruling, there were two things that came out: One was that we are to serve -- educate -- underserved children and making sure that they have a thorough and efficient education. And, the second was that childcare centers that were already existing were *not* to be displaced.

So, in the 26 years that we have been a part of the mixed-delivery program in Jersey City, there is one barrier that stands out among the rest, and that barrier is that when the collaborating entity, the district -- the Jersey City Board of Education -- cannot fulfill their part of the contract, we, as childcare centers, feel the brunt of their lack of being able to fill their contract.

Case in point: As we stand right now, childcare centers cannot enroll pre-K for children. The contract that is put out by the Department of Education clearly states that we are able to enroll 3s and 4s. At this time, we can only enroll 3s. And, in only enrolling 3s while the district enrolls 3s *and* 4s, our pool of eligible underserved children is not being fulfilled.

So, are we fulfilling the Abbott v. Burke ruling? You are putting centers out of business because, as it stands, the contract that we have to fulfill by September 2024 for the 2024-2025 school year, is not going to be met as I look at my number right now. It Takes a Village is to serve 120 children; we are now at the number 34.

Previously, when the ruling -- when we first started -- we were *filled*. Attendance, enrollment-- None of these issues that are before us now were an issue. Parents were choosing It Takes a Village and the other centers in Jersey City -- and they were choosing public schools.

Fast forward to 2006, when the public schools were having a problem with their enrollment. That's when they started the golden rule of, "If we need you, we will call you." And, in doing so, we are now at the point where our marketing line item is triple what it was when it first started. So, we are spending a lot of money in recruiting students. Businesses *will* close if it continues this way; childcare centers will have to close classrooms or close their doors.

The contract is clearly written, and the contract is very easy to follow. But, when the district does things that undermine the contract, we come to another event that took place as early as October 2023. In this event, we received an email. Childcare centers received an email from the Board of Education that gave us the information that we were going to be defunded. This means that we were now going to be paid based on our enrollment and not the contract. With this taking place, we have already started the school year. Teachers, assistants, have signed their contracts. What were we going to do?

In the email, it was also stated that we will have to close classrooms, let teachers go in order to stay fiscally sound, *and*, when we went to the district directors meeting, we were told that the district could absorb some of our students, but we would have to find other places for the students that we could no longer serve. We'd have to find some place for them to go.

Immediately, we contacted local politicians and we also contacted our State legislators with communication from Senator McKnight between the DOE and Board of Ed. In January -- December -- we were able to continue to with our funding thanks to them. Otherwise, childcare centers would have to close their doors.

Some solutions that I have. The contract, once again, is clear, and it forces a healthy environment between childcare centers and districts. But, the thing is, the districts have more of the upper hand. If we would be able to have a third party that governs the contract -- because you can't govern and implement as the district does -- if we are able to have a third party that governs the contract as the childcare centers implement the contract with the districts, it will put everybody on the same level -- fair and even-keeled. We will all be able to enroll pre-K 3s, pre-K 4s, and we will all be able to continue to serve -- educate -- underserved children, and childcare centers will not be displaced.

There *is* a problem with teacher shortage, and in the contract it does state that you need to have a P3-certified teacher in order to run the classroom. Because of the teacher shortage, let's be innovative and let's be creative. How about instead of saying that we need to have a certified P3 teacher, that we have people who are working towards that certification. We can go back to the early days of the inception of Abbott v. Burke, and we can

put funding into the system where we are supporting those who do want to work in education.

In our childcare centers, we do have staff who have CDAs; we do have staff who have associates in early childhood. If we are able to support the people who are already showing us that they want to work in early childhood and we have funding, it will attract others and it would allow those who are already in the system, who are already in CDA classrooms or courses, will be able to become interim teachers -- teachers in training, which would not bring the district salary, but it would bring a sustainable salary and benefits so the field becomes more attractive and in between the next three to five years, we will have a larger pool of people who want to work in education.

My third solution to some of our problems is for enrollment and for attendance. A big part of enrollment and attendance is that parents have a choice. Parents choose childcare centers not only because of the reputation of the school that they know that their child will learn and will be properly cared for, but they also choose childcare centers because of their travel to work -- their hours of work; services that are provided. And, they are -- they need to know that they have a support system in the area.

A lot of the parents in Jersey City do not work in Jersey City. A lot of them travel to New York, and travel-- The public traveling system isn't always reliable, so they need to have a support staff. So, we need to have an enrollment system that is not based on district lines but is based on parent choice. And, also have an enrollment system that includes looping. And, when I say looping, I mean that pre-K 3 children and pre-K 4 children -- once they complete the pre-K 3 program, they can also continue on in the childcare

center, if the parent chooses, for pre-K 4. In early childhood, there is a term called, “continue into youth care.” So, if you have an infant, the infant moves with their one or a couple of their care providers to the toddler room; then they will move onto the next level with a teacher or a caregiver from the classroom. That way they do not have to start over again.

Currently, in the system, children go from the 3-year-old program, then the parent has to find a 3-, a 4-year-old program, then they may have to find a kindergarten program, and parents just do not want all of that upheaval. They want their child to be in one place until they are able -- until the time they feel that their child is ready to move onto the next.

I know I said a lot that has to do with the mixed-delivery system not working, but I promise you there are several benefits. And, the benefits is the quantity of the children that you’re able to reach; the wealth of services with blending the district and the childcare services together, that these children and families reach; and the fact that the parents have a say in their child’s education. But, I want to be. Let you be warned that the barriers that we have faced in Jersey City have eclipsed the benefits. And, I want to get back to the benefits that we saw previously and before 2006.

Thank you for letting me speak, thank you for this opportunity, and any questions, I’m ready.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

Senator, do you mind if we hold until the-- That’s OK; no worries.

Go ahead.

**NOEL WORTHINGTON:** Hello, my name is Noel Worthington, and I am the Director of Wesley Nursery School in Oakhurst. I have been

the director for the past eight years, and prior to that I taught in the school for 10.

I would like to thank Senator Gopal for the invitation to speak before all of you here today.

Wesley Nursery School is a small nonprofit center that has been educating early learners ages 2 ½ through 5 years old since 1984. Due to the onset of universal preschool, our center -- like so many others -- are in jeopardy of closing since we are unable to compete with free. In fact, two long-running centers in our surrounding area have already closed due to the low enrollment, and being unable to pay staff and the many expenses that come with running a quality preschool program. One of the centers was assured that they would be a district partner, only to be told the classrooms are too small. She will be selling off all her goods this Saturday.

After meeting with two superintendents in our district area about partnering with the public school system, we have found that a mixed-delivery system, unfortunately, is not an option for Wesley Nursery School. While open to the idea at first, we found that we do not have the same idea set when it comes to policy in relation to the daily running of a learn-by-play preschool program, which is both nurturing and family oriented.

The beauty of our program is that we allow the children supervised free time where they get to make their own decisions about what to play and how to play. This encourages critical thinking and problem solving, which sets them up to manage other essential life skills. We also serve children from other districts -- not just those based in our town, which would have to change for the district partnerships. We have our own curriculum that has proven successful over the course of time.

The New Jersey Department of Children and Families licenses our center, so we are already following a proper protocol in terms of regulations -- and there are quite a bunch of them. However -- excuse me -- so, they license us. However, their regulations allow us to pivot in the classroom to fit the specific needs of the population while the universal preschool program's strict adherence to their curriculum is not. We strive to meet the needs of each individual child, and there is not a one-size-fits-all pattern of teaching these young learners.

Some of our amazing programs include monthly art-inspired activities based on famous artists; a fun "feed the cat" week; superhero week; holidays around the world; just to name a few. I have been told many stories of how the public preschool system is working, and I find some of it concerning.

For example, in one of the local elementary schools, the art teacher asked the preschool class to please color butterflies for their art show. The preschool teacher said the students are not able to because it does not fit with the curriculum, and the preschool administrator closely observes the curriculum to make sure that every rule is followed accordingly to comply with the many grant specifications, and they would be reprimanded from veering from the lesson plan.

Another example: There is an in-district preschool teacher -- whose children come to our facility -- said they were learning about trees, but they couldn't even go outside and look at a tree, because the curriculum did not warrant it. This, frankly, takes the wonder and joy out of learning for the children and the staff.

In addition, our classes are age-based, unlike the public preschool classes that have mixed-age groups. There is a big difference between a just-turned 3-year-old and an older 4- or 5-year-old in terms of behavior and specific needs in the classroom. Each and every day in a preschool classroom should be filled with a playful learning environment.

Our enrollment is down about 40%, especially in the 4-year-old range. In an ideal world, we would ask that New Jersey educators adopt a system similar to Florida's voluntarily pre-Kindergarten education program, where parents can choose from private centers and schools, public schools, family childcare homes, and specialized instructional service providers. As a nonprofit center, and others like us would benefit-- As a nonprofit, our center and others like us would benefit from educational grants from the State to help offset the cost of tuition to our families. We are also open to assisting the public school districts with their overflow of children, and would welcome them into our program while still maintaining our own methods, standards, daily schedule, and costs.

We would ask that the district underwrite these students' tuition at our rates -- which, by the way, we have not raised our fees in nine years as a nonprofit. A more flexible agreement between the private and public entities would be more beneficial for all involved parties. Parents should be the ones to choose the way their children are educated and where they would like them to be educated.

In conclusion, I implore New Jersey's educational policymakers to not overlook the early childhood learning centers that have been in this field for decades, and to assist us in maintaining our preschools so that we

can continue to do what is best, which is provide a quality early education for all our students.

I leave you with one of my favorite quotes: “Children need the freedom and time to play. Play is not a luxury; play is a necessity.”

I thank you all for your time today.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you, Noel.

Back row -- second row, sorry.

**S A M A N T H A H O W A R D:** My name is Samantha Howard; I am the Executive Director of the Bayonne Economic Opportunity Foundation, of which our Head Start program is under our nonprofit umbrella.

We have participated in mixed-delivery with the Board of Education for about five years now, and there are true benefits to that program as our children in the classrooms are being better prepared or more readily prepared to enter into the Board of Education school district, and the resources that surround that, provided by the Board of Education, are wonderful. These children are receiving 504 plans more readily; IEP plans more readily.

However, like the young lady who spoke from KinderCare about the size of the classroom being a stopping point for other classrooms being a part of that partnership, that creates almost a have-or-have-not culture within the Head Start program, in that those resources are going to a few classrooms and not to all classrooms. And, it's seen-- We have to work extra hard to keep that from being an issue internally, when all the classrooms really are worthy of the partnership; all the children are worthy of the partnership.

Like all schools-- And, I think everyone has spoken to, we are competing with the Board of Education when it comes to qualified staff

leaving. We've actually had staff who obtain their certifications through, while working at Head Start, been a success to the program, but, within one or two years later, the Board of Education has recruited them and they've moved on, causing a hinderance to our program.

When it comes to the partnership, the Board of Education has-- Our relationship has improved, but there's still a sense of ownership as opposed to partnership. Sometimes I feel as if though we are being told what to do, how to do it, and when to do it, when we really have our own guidelines through Head Start that we must adhere to.

So, this young lady spoke about a third party. Thank you, because a third-party intervention would be wonderful to facilitate that partnership, as opposed to dictatorship, if you will.

And, then, also, the parity. The parity for the teachers that we used in our partnership with the Board of Education is not equal to what the teachers are receiving in the Board of Education. So, those are scenarios that just to speak to when it comes to the partnership improvements. However, I would like to end on a positive note that the children who we do have in those partnerships do go into the school system more readily prepared and able, which really speaks to the expansion and opportunity to provide that partnership throughout the entire Head Start program within the City of Bayonne.

So, thank you.

**P E T E R M A P L E:** Hi, my name is Pete Maple; I am also a Program Director at It Takes a Village preschool, located in the Greenville section of Jersey City.

I'll try not to be redundant based on what my colleague already spoke about.

But, what I will start with is we're all at a crossroads in terms of early childhood education. Early childhood education is the front line of the defense. We've been in early childhood long enough for us to see tangible proof of the benefits of early childhood education. One of the young women who spoke earlier, she spoke about employing former students. We currently have two teachers at our school who were former students.

My colleague spoke about the contract. A contract-- The purpose of a contract is to keep both sides on level playing fields. And, right now, we don't feel that that's occurring in our district in Jersey City. My colleague also said that it states in the first paragraph of the contract that the district is contracting with *you* to provide educational services for pre-K 3 and pre-K 4 students. Each year, as we end the school year -- just as we're ending this school year now -- we've had parents who are coming to us actively, asking us could their child stay for another year under our pre-K 4 program? And, each time, we have to tell that parent, "No, you have to register with the district."

Now, that creates a problem on a lot of different fronts. One, oftentimes we may have a pre-K 3 student who has a sibling who is in our infant and toddler program. We may have a parent who's using mass transportation to go back and forth to work. So, now, when you're talking about dropping an infant and a toddler off in one location and dropping off a pre-K 4 student in another location when you could have just had it all in house, you have some parents who are at a point of no return because maybe that pre-K 3 student who was with us, they might have had an IEP or some

other issue that they watched their child grow leaps and bounds under our flag, under our umbrella. And, now, they feel that, based on the gains my child received while they were at said school, now I have to take them to a new environment.

And, as we know, preschool-aged children sometimes don't adapt to change easily. We foster an environment at our facility where Jay may be the child's primary teacher, but our staff knows every student -- and, I'm sure that goes for a lot of these other schools in here, too -- it's not just about the children who are in that classroom; these children become a part of the fabric of the preschool. And, the parents see that, and they appreciate that. And, when you take away that choice from the parent, I think it makes us-- We sort of take two steps backwards.

And, now, in terms of the solution. I think the solution is real simple for this particular issue: Honor the contract. Just simply honor the contract, OK? There's no upper hand involved in a contract. At the beginning of the school year, we get a contract; and we go over it and we agree to the parameters in the contract; and we sign that contract. I signed one for one particular site; my colleague signs one for another particular site; and the powers that be at the district, they sign that contract. Our feet are held to the fire in terms of honoring that contract. The only thing we ask is that the district also honors that contract and respects the rights of the parents in terms of their choice.

Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you for the opportunity to be in the midst of this forum where all of us are like-minded in terms of wanting to see early childhood grow.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

A couple questions, and I'll go to members.

Superintendent, on the curricula specifically, you said that you would like to see a phase-in time period. Do you see anything else unreasonable besides, as far as the actual curricular requirements that DOE is asking for?

DR. GOLDEY: So, I find it interesting -- although I believe 100% in research-based curriculum -- I find it interesting the DOE has designated for curricula to use when, in the K-8 or K-12 world, there's not necessarily that direction.

So, from the public school perspective, no, because we use creative curriculum. From the partnership mixed-delivery perspective, especially for some of our private providers who have been doing things similar to what was shared by my colleague here, it might be a little bit difficult for them to move into that realm. I won't speak for the private providers, but I believe that there would be, definitely, a phase-in program or something that would require a lot of partnership in developing that together.

SENATOR GOPAL: So, if you had the opportunity to, and changes get made, and either, A, they would successfully lobby DOE to make some of the changes we're talking about, or B, we do it legislatively, and you have the opportunity to work with some schools designated in the Tinton Falls area, would they-- Would you be doing programs at their locations, or would you be bringing them into your public school building?

DR. GOLDEY: As far as for training is concerned, or--

SENATOR GOPAL: For its actual education.

DR. GOLDEY: For education it would be done at their building.

SENATOR GOPAL: OK.

And, just a question for either the operators in Jersey City or Bayonne.

Is there -- when you do your-- It looks like it's a lot of Jersey City Board of Ed. focused issues. But, when you look at the contract, is there any involvement from the county superintendent or from DOE or anyone else when you do that contract between the district and provider?

MS. MAPLE: The contract is actually written by DOE.

SENATOR GOPAL: So, they sign off, they approve, they go through everything?

MS. MAPLE: The district--

SENATOR GOPAL: So, there kind of is a third party, no?

MS. MAPLE: Well, when we contact the Department of Education in order to iron out or get clarity, they pretty much play the middle. They really don't side with the district or the childcare centers, so we need someone who would be able to do that.

But, the contract is written by the Department of--

SENATOR GOPAL: But shouldn't that be DOE? Aren't they the third party?

MS. MAPLE: They do not.

SENATOR GOPAL: What kind of third party are you envisioning?

MS. MAPLE: I am envisioning a third party that it could be the childcare CC R&Rs; Urban League Program for Parents; it could be Montclair who does a lot of the (indiscernible) New Jersey (indiscernible) site implementations, who are knowledgeable in early childhood and who can step in and just pretty much govern the disputes that may come up -- or

concerns, or address concerns that may come up within the implementation process of the contract.

Pretty much, the contract is very easy to follow. It's just that when they start doing these unwritten rules that childcare centers have to follow, it becomes very difficult to sustain.

SENATOR GOPAL: Got it; understood.

And, Noel, as you tried to engage with the Ocean Township School District, has there -- what are the -- I know you went through a lot of challenges there are.

If-- Do you think there's anywhere where enrollment should play a role in this process?

MS. WORTHINGTON: I do. We would be happy to accept a partnership; however, the guidelines, the strictness, the non-flexibility, just doesn't work for us.

I did not mention -- because church and state -- but we are also the mission of the First United Methodist Church. Only one of our classrooms is eligible to partner. That leaves me with two smaller classrooms and, technically, two programs: one that is the mission of the church, and then one that is a public preschool entity.

I just don't see how they can come together.

SENATOR GOPAL: The church is your landlord, or you're actually part of--

MS. WORTHINGTON: No, we are the Mission of the First United Methodist Church.

SENATOR GOPAL: Got it, OK.

So, the other areas I know that you and I have talked about were restroom facilities and the -- or, maybe it was different facilities--

MS. WORTHINGTON: No, we have the restroom facility.

SENATOR GOPAL: Oh, you have -- OK. The square footage?

MS. WORTHINGTON: With two of the classrooms, the square footage does not meet.

SENATOR GOPAL: With two -- does not meet.

MS. WORTHINGTON: Yes. Only one classroom. We only have three classrooms, we're a very small facility.

SENATOR GOPAL: And, where should enroll-- Let's say everything else got resolved. Where would enrollment play a role?

MS. WORTHINGTON: Our 4-year-old classroom is in need of students, and we'd be happy to have them. But, unfortunately, Ocean Township said it could only be an Ocean Township classroom.

So, what happens to my 3-year-olds who are moving up who would like to stay in our school?

SENATOR GOPAL: That's up to Ocean Township, or that's up to DOE?

MS. WORTHINGTON: Ocean Township--

SENATOR GOPAL: The school district--

MS. WORTHINGTON: The school district--

SENATOR GOPAL: --is deciding if they participate in this program, you have to come to their public school?

MS. WORTHINGTON: Yes.

So, when I met with Superintendent Weldon, she asked me -- I think I have nine children in the classroom -- and she said, "Are they all from

Ocean Township? Because we will absorb them into the program.” And, I said, “Unfortunately, they are not, they are from many surrounding districts.”

SENATOR GOPAL: Senator McKnight.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Mr. and Mrs. Maple, and Ms. Samantha from my district, I appreciate you being here and advocating for the children in our district.

And, to anyone else who has come here so far today, thank you. We’ve taken a lot of information and I appreciate your recommendations, and I appreciate your advocacy to make sure that early childhood education thrives and not go away.

So, thank you so much for your testimony.

MS. MAPLE: Thank you. Thank you.

MR. MAPLE: Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Senator Corrado.

SENATOR CORRADO: Thank you, Chairman.

Can you talk to me or explain what the issue is with the 4-year-olds? Because more than one of you mentioned that you don’t have the 4-year-olds in your program.

MS. WORTHINGTON: So, once the--

SENATOR CORRADO: Private programs.

MS. WORTHINGTON: Once the children turn 3 or 4, they are eligible for the universal preschool programs in their districts.

So, we are tuition-based -- even though we have not raised our fees -- but it’s free. We cannot compete with free; we just can’t. So, while we can take children who are 2 ½ , those children, once they turn 3 the following year, are leaving to go to the free public school system.

SENATOR CORRADO: Thank you, I appreciate that.

MS. WORTHINGTON: You're welcome.

SENATOR CORRADO: And, then, just one quick question on -- somebody briefly touched on IEPs, with special needs and early intervention.

And, so, how is that going to work with the private partnerships? Are you offering those programs or services already in the community-based options?

MS. MAPLE: So, with the collaboration for mixed-delivery systems in the childcare -- with the childcare in the district -- the district provides a wealth of services; that's a benefit. And, one of those services is school nurse, who comes out and they do dental, vision, hearing, screenings with the students. But, we also have the expertise of the PIRT team, which is a preschool intervention team. They have now changed the name to something else, but I'm just going to go with what I remember right now.

So, it's the PIRT team who are psychologists, behavioral specialists, speech specialists, PT specialists. And, they come out to the centers where the teacher says that she has a concern. They will come out and they will do observations, and then the process goes on from there. It could be something as simple as just giving strategies to the families and the classroom teachers, or it could be something a little more sustaining where the child has to receive special services.

So, we are able and capable and willing to serve special needs.

MS. HOWARD: And, in Bayonne, we do have-- We have the PIRT team as well, thank you. They did change their name, but I'm with you on-- And, they do, they come in at least three or four times a week in

that classroom, so those resources are more readily available as opposed to a classroom who has to make the recommendation to the Board of Education to take a look into this child and get a strategy.

It's months in difference, as far as that child being taken into consideration outside that classroom.

SENATOR CORRADO: And, I think that's a really important point, and I'm glad that somebody did raise it, because I think that's something that should be taken into consideration as well, and we're able to provide that. It really does make the earlier the intervention the better outcome.

So, thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

Senators Turner, Henry -- anything?

You guys are good? No, you don't have to; only if you had something. (laughter)

SENATOR HENRY: I didn't know if it was the right time or not; thank you.

No, I just want to make some comments.

And, certainly, thank everyone for coming out and testifying today. The information you've provided is priceless, really.

And, I've been an advocate and promoter of this program for about 15 years now, and I started out on the Board of Education in a district where we had small business owners coming. We made it work. It's certainly a win for the early learner; it gives them more opportunity. It's a win for the family, it gives them more options. It's a win for the provider, it gives them that basic financial business plan, stability. Someone mentioned a five-year

plan -- every business has a five-year plan moving forward. And, those things are so important. It's a win for the community. It's a win for a quality of life, this type of program.

And, I'd like to thank the superintendent for bringing up the flexibility. A lot of times here in Trenton, we think one size fits all, and it does not. We need to give the flexibility to the superintendents; to Board of Educations; to the providers in that community to make it work. And, I believe they can. One size doesn't fit all -- no pun intended -- but certainly that minimal square foot should not make a difference in a community that has the ability to make it work.

In Trenton, we just -- I think we mess things up more than we try to fix them. So, let's give the community that provides the people in this room the opportunity to make it work, Senator. And, they can -- they will make it work. And, at the end of the day, we'll be a better state and we'll be a better community.

So, thank you for coming out today.

Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thanks, Senator.

All right, thank you guys.

Let's next bring up Cindy Shields, President of New Jersey Association for the Education of Young Children. Shadaya Bennett and Winifred Smith-Jenkins, for Advocates for Children of New Jersey. And, Althea Ford from the New Jersey Business and Industry Association.

We only have seven more panels after this.

(laughter)

SENATOR GOPAL: It's a joke.

Cindy, would you like to start?

**S H A D A Y A B E N N E T T:** I'll go first.

Good afternoon, Chairman Gopal and members of the Committee.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide comments on New Jersey's preschool mixed-delivery system.

Again, my name is Shadaya Bennett, and I am the Senior Legislative Analyst at the Advocates for Children of New Jersey.

While many of my comments were elevated during the previous panels, I would like to re-emphasize some of those points from a children-and-families advocacy perspective.

ACNJ is committed to ensuring all children have access to high-quality care and education in safe and enriching environments. We know that access to high quality early care and education supports healthy development, and provides a pathway to social, emotional, and academic success.

New Jersey has long been recognized as a national leader in providing high-quality preschool education. ACNJ has been at the forefront of those efforts. Over 20 years ago, ACNJ's former President and CEO, Cecilia Zalkind, played a pivotal role in advocating before the State Supreme Court for high-quality standards in New Jersey's State-funded preschool programs. Her efforts, along with the Early Care Coalition, were instrumental in initiating the *Abbot v. Burke* decision -- sorry.

More recently, ACNJ has also been at the forefront of raising awareness about preschool expansion and helping community providers

navigate related processes to promote collaboration and equip stakeholders with the necessary tools to serve children effectively.

As New Jersey expands access to free public preschool, we want to re-emphasize the need for a strong system that supports the continuum of care for children birth -- sorry -- children birth to age 5. While we fully support universal pre-K, we recognize that there are unintended consequences related to expansion, which negatively impact our already fragile childcare system. Therefore, New Jersey must be deliberate in structuring and expanding preschool delivery while considering the sustainability of the childcare infrastructure to, again, prevent reducing the availability of infant and toddler slots, which could lead to childcare center closures and restricted access for families.

We agree with previous comments in recommending that the State adopt a strong, well-conceived mixed-delivery system. This would include creating sustainable partnerships between school districts and community providers, aligning classroom size requirements with the Department of Children and Families licensing standards, and supporting the workforce. And, again, additionally, to incentivize school districts to partner with community providers, it is recommended that a certain percentage of funding for new preschool expansion aid be designated for those who commit to partnering with providers in the community through mixed delivery.

These are all examples of measures that would mitigate barriers for community providers who seek to participate in a statewide program and would foster a more inclusive and effective early care and education landscape. While we recognize that a mixed-delivery system is essential to achieving New Jersey's mission of providing high-quality preschool at no cost

for families, it is imperative to preserve programs that already offer vital supports to the same population.

Childcare is everyone's business. Providers operate a small -- operate small businesses that provide a public good. Childcare is the system by which our youngest residents are nurtured and educated outside of the home. And, it plays a crucial role in our state's economic ecosystem. So, we need to support its infrastructure within our broader education system through a solid mixed-delivery system.

And, with that, I'll turn it over to my colleague, Dr. Winifred Smith-Jenkins, who, with over 20 years of unique lived experience and expertise in early childhood education, can elaborate on the challenges within the system and some recommended solutions.

**WINIFRED SMITH - JENKINS, Ed.D.:** Thank you so much for holding this hearing on mixed delivery.

Again, my name is Winifred Smith-Jenkins, and I am the Director of Early Learning for Policy and Advocacy at ACNJ.

Before working at ACNJ, I spent 20 years as a childcare director for our family-owned small businesses. Last year I transitioned to advocacy, because I believe our childcare system is on the verge of collapse.

But, please understand that, along with ACNJ, I personally fully support the expansion of public preschool. But, collectively, we acknowledge that it has had some unintended negative consequences on childcare and the supply of infant and toddler care within our state.

So, it's my hope that by working together, we can make the necessary corrections. Therefore, my role in today's hearing is to highlight

seven recommendations broken into two sections: Barriers to collaboration, and fractures in the current system.

Starting with barriers to collaboration. We agree with our colleagues about square footage. Therefore, our first recommendation is to align the Department of Education's square footage requirement for community providers -- which is currently 63.3 square feet per child -- with the Department of Children and Families Office of Licensing guidelines of 35 square feet per child, like most of the United States. And, it's also important to note that this misalignment only occurs in New Jersey and New Hampshire.

According to a recent report, more than 62% of New Jersey's providers cannot meet the DOE requirement, which means many providers cannot collaborate with their local school district, thus risking the sustainability of their businesses, as well as the availability of infant and toddler care throughout our state.

In Fall of 2022, of the nearly 20,000 preschool students in districts funded through preschool expansion, only 3,300 of them are in provider sites. As it stands now, in order for a community provider who is already educating students 3 and 4 years old to participate in the public preschool program, they need to combine two classrooms into one, thus further limiting childcare availability or find additional space and undergo the lengthy, expensive, and daunting childcare licensing process before being able to collaborate.

As a result, many of these community providers currently working with 3- and 4-year-olds are likely to lose this group of students to public preschool programs -- and, just as likely within a couple of years, their

business. After all, providers cannot operate centers with only infants and toddlers, and parents will eventually stop paying for preschool if they can get it for free.

While NIEER developed national quality standards for publicly funded preschool programs and the Department of Human Services developed quality standards for childcare centers here in the State of New Jersey, neither entity face the standards on classroom square footage. This DCF alignment will immediately allow more providers to participate in the public preschool program, while saving small businesses *and* the limited supply of infant and toddler care currently available within our state.

Recommendation 2: Form a stakeholder group composed of childcare and Head Start providers participating and not participating in the public preschool program. Representatives from NIEER, (indiscernible), DCF, DHS, advocates, and school districts to work with the DOE to modernize the provider contract. This will help remove barriers to collaboration, reduce administrative burden, and fix funding formulas that dis-incentivize retaining infant and toddler programs within community provider sites.

Recommendation 3: Establish legislation that treats childcare providers collaborating with public schools as a protected vendor class in school contracts, allowing multi-year contracts to secure funding for facility upgrades and new program start-up costs. The current one-year contract makes it nearly impossible for community providers to secure bank loans to cover long-term financial investments needed for collaboration with school districts. Additionally, it offers no assurances that the collaboration will

continue beyond the current school year, creating an imbalanced power dynamic between the school district and the providers.

So, now, let's address the fractures in the current system focusing on workforce enrollment, funding, and pay parity.

And, just like Senator Ruiz stated, recommendation 1: Workforce. Provide financial support and time for non-certified public school teachers to return to school and become degree teachers. This includes funding for books, childcare, transportation, and remedial courses, with pay increases as milestones are met -- similar to what we did during Abbott.

In December 2023, we surveyed Abbott providers across our state, and 96 providers responded. Of those, 65% stated that they currently have substitute teachers in the classroom due to the challenges of finding certified teachers. A copy of this survey has been included in your packet today. Abbott teachers are now losing their certified teachers, putting the achievement gaps we work so hard for to close over the last 25 years in jeopardy of resurfacing. It's imperative that we do everything possible to support our current workforce, while also working to build a pipeline for the future.

Recommendation 2: Enrollment. Launch a statewide public awareness campaign about public preschool, and work with districts to reduce barriers to school enrollment. Ensure a fair distribution of student enrollment across end district and provider sites. Reject proposals to open new preschool classrooms if provider sites are not fully enrolled. One provider surveyed in December stated, "The school district continues to open in-district preschool classes and poach our parents to register with them

instead of collaborating.” Moreover, we’ve heard similar comments from many providers, indicating to us the significance of this problem.

We’ve also just listened to a school district -- and, we’ve heard of a few more -- only allowing providers to educate the 3-year-olds as opposed to both the 3- and 4-year-olds. This means providers yearly must recruit their full number of contracted slots while the district capitalizes on the provider’s students -- limiting their enrollment needs and unduly penalizing providers. This is just one example of unfair power dynamics that hurt partnerships.

Recommendation 3: Funding. Ensure that districts fully fund participating childcare providers for all of their contracted slots. Currently, school districts are fully-funded for their total reported enrollment, but penalized community providers who are under-enrolled. When providers meet with the district’s fiscal specialist to create their budget for the upcoming year, they should review the number of contracted slots to determine if the allocation is appropriate. Once agreed upon, the contracted amount must be maintained without any cuts during the year. Like my colleague said, “Honor the contract.”

And, finally, recommendation Number 4: Pay parity. Clearly define and require pay parity between district teachers and teachers at provider sites. Again, according to our December survey, six out of 10 programs have lost P3 certified teachers to the district. Providers have reported salary differences ranging from \$15,000 to \$25,000. Addressing this issue is essential to ensuring quality and equity across the preschool program.

In conclusion, mixed-delivery is vital to the sustainability of New Jersey’s childcare system. By addressing these issues, we can ensure that all

children have access to a high-quality early education. With the support of the Legislature, we can solve these problems, protect community providers, and strengthen New Jersey's mixed-delivery system.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

**CINDY SHIELDS:** Good afternoon Senator Gopal and the rest of the Senate Education Committee.

My name is Cindy Shields, and I am both President of the New Jersey Association for the Education of Young Children and the Senior Childcare Director of the YMCA of Metuchen, Edison, Woodbridge, and South Amboy.

In my 30 years at the Y, I have watched us grow into the large provider of care in Middlesex County, serving families with young children from birth to 13 years of age in early care and education programs, before- and after-school care, and summer camp. Some of our programs also collaborate with Perth Amboy School District -- formerly known as Abbott.

NJAEYC is an affiliate of our national organization -- the National Association For the Education of Young Children. NAECY or Nacy is a large nonprofit association in the United States that represents early childhood education teachers; paraeducators; center directors; trainers; college educators; families of young children; policymakers; and advocates.

Here in New Jersey, NJAEYC has the same representation across the state, and, on behalf of our members and partners, we thank you for the opportunity to have our voice represented today.

NJAEYC supports all opportunities that offer accessible, affordable, and high-quality early care and education for New Jersey's

children, including preschool expansion when delivered in an equitable way. As the President of NJAEYC, I hear from many providers across the state about the various issues facing our industry. And, the implementation of mixed delivery absorbs a large portion of this narrative. The main barriers that community-based providers face are things that we believe can be overcome with partnerships, and I'd like to speak on just three of those barriers.

First, contracts. Providers are trepidatious of entering into a short-term, one-year contract with school districts. When providers take on this partnership, they often make long-term and expensive alterations to their programs with regard to curriculum, staffing, enrollment, revenue, and, often, even the physical layout of their school. All of this is done at the center's expense, with only a 10-month commitment from the school district. Multi-year contracts between the school district and the community providers will strengthen the provider-district relationship and give the community providers the confidence they need to invest in the collaboration.

Second, earlier release of contracts. Community providers need adequate time to prepare to partner with their local school districts. By releasing the application sooner, community providers will be able to adequately prepare; families will be better informed and resourced about the changes in their child's care and education; and districts and providers will build a stronger working relationship while strategizing together about the implementation of the changes and improvements.

Lastly -- and most importantly -- it is important for everyone to understand the barriers that have kept many providers out of mixed delivery so far and with systems that regulate them. Childcare centers are required to

meet the space requirements of the Department of Children and Families Office of Licensing -- which is 35 square feet as previously noted. Childcare centers that are rated by our State's Quality Rating Improvement System -- Grow New Jersey Kids -- are required to meet many other elevated requirements above and beyond licensing, but the same space requirement is the same -- 35 square feet. That means that the entire New Jersey childcare system operates on the same space requirement of 35 square feet per child, compared to the higher recommendation as required by the Department of Education in the preschool expansion guidelines.

By creating new and different requirements for programs to meet in order to be eligible for mixed-delivery collaboration, we're creating conflicting definitions of quality for our state's youngest learners. As an unintentional result, many community providers are unable to participate. NJAEYC understands and respects the research around the space requirements; however, we are compelled to articulate the contradictions between State programs through the lens of our community providers.

How is it that one heavily funded system -- Grow New Jersey Kids -- can say -- can deem a center high-quality, yet another heavily funded system -- preschool expansion and mixed delivery -- can say that they are not? By maintaining different space requirements for different departments, we are further fracturing the early education system in New Jersey. Ideally, we need to meet our industry where it is and build from there.

If we can recognize that the majority of community providers are not eligible to meet the mixed-delivery components simply because of the size of their classrooms and still allow them to participate, we will be able to reach more 3- and 4-year-olds; provide family choice; as well as keep our infant,

toddler, wraparound, and summer-care options in place for working families. Only then will we be able to focus on creating facility expansion opportunities for centers to meet the research rather than defeat an already existing infrastructure in our state.

NJAEYC is excited for the opportunity our State has to build a robust mixed-delivery system that will both serve our 3- and 4-year-olds and create a strong early care and education system within our communities. We can accomplish this by understanding the true landscape of our early education system, meet it where it is, and build upon it without losing the experience, expertise, and, mostly importantly, our essential childcare industry.

Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

Althea.

**ALTHEA D. FORD:** Hello; good afternoon, Chairman Gopal, and members of the Senate Education Committee.

I am Althea Ford, Vice President of Government Affairs for the New Jersey Business and Industry Association.

On behalf of the member companies that make the New Jersey Business and Industry Association the largest, most impactful statewide association representing New Jersey businesses, I thank you for the opportunity to offer our perspective on the importance, the challenges, and the opportunities of the preschool mixed-delivery system. Our membership includes several early childhood education providers, and their experiences with the preschool mixed-delivery system have been thoroughly expressed by the previous witnesses, who have provided extensive subject matter expertise

concerning early childhood education and the status of the private pay and public preschool operations.

The business community, as you can imagine, has a vested interest in ensuring a robust and diverse early childhood education and childcare system. Childcare providers offer a vital service to working families, ensuring access to quality and reliable care so that working parents can literally show up for work every day and continue to contribute to the State's economic growth.

A 2022 report by the Rutgers Center for Women and Work on the status of women in New Jersey noted the changes women have had to make while engaging the workforce in order to respond to childcare disruptions: forgoing full-time employment; higher wages; healthcare; and other benefits for the flexibility to care for their young children. But, please, make no mistake, childcare and early childhood education issues are not just a women's issue; not just a family issue; but, it is an economic issue that requires the same level of attention and investment as any other economic-development initiative.

And, for that, we thank you for this forum in order to offer our comments and amplify this matter.

From a business perspective with a keen eye on operating inefficiencies, I offer the following insights that are vital to the successful execution of the program:

First, encourage and incentivize partnership. The State will realize significant efficiencies by fully investing in a mixed-delivery model that utilizes the existing infrastructure of licensed childcare providers and community-based providers that are willing and ready to be a part of this

initiative. Licensed providers and community-based providers offer care that is robust and responsive to the needs of the workforce, with hours extending past the traditional public sector offerings, including holidays, winter, and spring breaks -- and, over the summer. I cannot emphasize that enough. State acknowledgement of these providers and financial incentive to encourage their engagement, as well as streamlining the regulatory process, will ensure that all providers have access to participation. And, this is imperative to ensuring the program's success.

Secondly, work within the existing regulatory framework. As noted before, licensed childcare providers and family childcare providers are regulated through DCF. In order to receive and maintain a license, providers must adhere to facility and other operational expectations established by DCF. Preschool expansion is operated by DOE, which has established its own regulations and expectations for facility space and other operational items. The two department requirements conflict, making provider operations challenging and inconsistent, resulting in contradicting definitions of quality for our early childhood facilities.

This is also financially wasteful for both providers who invest thousands of dollars to conform with the DOE's requirements, only for their contracts to be denied or non-renewed; and to the State, which has significant funds in both the Grow NJ Program and preschool expansion. But, those funds are unable to be efficiently utilized due to the bifurcated system of quality metrics. To advance true partnership and to avoid unnecessary regulatory incongruence, we strongly urge the use of DCF's facility requirements as the standard bearer, because it provides consistency across all licensed childcare facilities and does not put any one licensed facility at a

deficit because they may not have the financial capital to reconfigure their facility to a standard that they are not required to do so by DCF.

And, lastly, do not compromise infant and toddler care. We caution against any plans for continued expansion of the preschool program that are pursued if they compromise the delivery, the availability, and the access to infant and toddler care. The early childhood business model relies on the enrollment of infant, toddler, and preschool children, and the State cannot ignore the fiscal impact that preschool expansion has had on providers that care for infants and toddlers. Continuing expansion without some sort of financial consideration for the licensed and community providers offering infant and toddler care will render care unaffordable and significantly reduce the number of providers that can offer this care.

The State's investment in preschool expansion is laudable, and we encourage its implementation in an efficient and effective manner, and we look forward to the continued collaboration.

Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

Any questions from members? (no response)

On the contracting -- this is for anyone; Althea, whoever -- is there a State policy or law that you have to contract every year, or can-- Could the DOE or district do three or five years or something like that? If you're aware -- we can find that answer out, too, but see if anyone knows.

MS. SHIELDS: I think it's just the way it's always been done.

SENATOR GOPAL: OK.

Is there a year that you think makes sense?

MS. SHIELDS: I would say a minimum of three, but five would be ideal.

Sorry.

Five would be ideal.

SENATOR GOPAL: Got it.

Is there -- is there-- The provider from Jersey City really saw a lot of concerns with the Board of Ed. I think, the provider there.

Do you see your providers across the spectrum having specific challenges in their school districts, or do you think it's just unique -- unique situations here and there as it relates to contracts?

DR. SMITH-JENKINS: I don't believe that this is a unique issue with just Jersey City. I think that there are a variety of different ways that different districts are handling the contract negotiation, and one of the issues that Jersey City highlighted, we've heard from another district.

When you have to-- When you lose your 4-year-old population and you're not allowed to educate that 4-year-old population, it doesn't allow for that looping. You are literally-- If you are contracted for 75 slots, you are literally, every year, going out trying to recruit 75 students. However, the district now gets to capitalize on that 75 students who you're now sending to their program on top of the fact that their 3-year-olds have now turned to be 4-year-olds. And, so, they get all of those students as well. When the district also has a pot of money and they're issuing funding to the provider sites, they're having to spend so much of their money on recruitment and retention of students.

That is a huge problem.

SENATOR GOPAL: Senator McKnight.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: So, I do have a question.

I know in Jersey City this was one of the-- This happens in Jersey City.

So, if you don't spend the provider -- they don't spend all the money at the end of the year; they have to return it back to the district. Can you speak a little bit more on that?

DR. SMITH-JENKINS: Let me first say that I am now putting on that provider hat, as opposed to the ACNJ hat, and kind of speaking from some lived experience.

What ends up happening is that if providers are having to-- If the district is recouping money mid-year, providers don't necessarily know every month what their check will be -- what their check amount will be. And, so, as you start to think about expenses that are coming up, you may end up saying, "I'm not going to spend all this money on X,Y,Z, I know I need to pay my teachers but, I also know I need to pay my teachers for the rest of the year, the school year."

And, so, you're kind of squirreling away money trying to figure out, "How can I manage and balance both of them?" You get to a point towards the end of the year, like March or April, where you're like, "Oh my gosh, I've done so much trying to ensure that I can get all the way to June paying salaries that I now end up having a little bit more money, but that means I've really suffered." The program has suffered throughout the whole year because of this kind of underfunding. I hope I explained it OK.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: So, the second question to that is, do you have a suggestion on how to mitigate that?

MS. SHIELDS: I'll give you a specific example to illustrate your first question, and then I'll have a suggestion, also.

I have a small program in a district formerly known as Abbott. The license is for 49 children; 30 of those seats are district seats and the remainder are private seats for infants and toddlers in the community. That center was under-enrolled by 10 children this year, so, of our 30 seats, we had 20, and we have a shortfall of about \$150,000 that the district will recoup at the end of the year.

So, fortunately, it's part of a larger organization. I could make up some of those funds from elsewhere, but, if I was a small mom-and-pop small business, I wouldn't be able to cover that shortfall. There-- To me, there is no such thing as unspent funds in a childcare program. And, if you have children and you're familiar with the childcare industry, you know every dime we make goes back into the program.

I believe one of my colleagues mentioned before a solution would be to fund the contract on the number of contracted slots, not the number of enrolled slots. Because we still need to employ the same number of teachers; paraprofessionals; keep the lights on; keep the doors open; keep the heat on; so on and so forth.

DR. SMITH-JENKINS: Within my written testimony, I've also given an example of what that actually looks like in black and white, just FYI.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: OK, so, I know someone else mentioned earlier about funding. So to me, it just seems as if we had an issue with funding and giving money back to the district, if the money remains in the childcare provider facility, that will kind of fix the funding issue.

Correct or partially correct?

MS. SHIELDS: You're partially correct, OK. It's *very* complicated and complex.

But, yes, it would fill the shortfall if that money could stay with the providers. It goes back to the district and it goes back to the district -- we're not sure. So, we're still left at a deficit.

It's very difficult. It's very difficult to be on the front lines, and you want to do the best for these children. And, I will say from the very beginning, the first thing I wanted to say is that the preschool services for the State-funded preschools are miraculous. They're nothing short of miraculous -- the children come in at 3; they've never been out of their homes, some of them; they don't feed themselves; and then they leave and they're writing sentences; and they're starting to read; and they have such a vast knowledge of the world around them. It's amazing.

I think the funding formula probably has some room for improvement, which I'm sure Winifred could speak to a little better than I could.

DR. SMITH-JENKINS: When you think about the funding formula, it doesn't allow for you being able to retain the most qualified and most experienced teachers. At some point, even their salaries will be too much for your program to be able to accommodate. And, so, at some point you're kind of always in this space of turning over teachers as well, and also, therefore, jeopardizing quality. So, kind of in that -- kind of giving this pseudo budget of what happens within a classroom; what it looks like it may be under-enrolled by three students, but it also is giving an average of a \$60,000-per-year teacher.

If you're thinking that those numbers go up, you'll also start to notice what happens when districts start to recoup money mid-year from a program, and how it can impact the quality overall.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Through the Chair, (indiscernible)

So, (indiscernible), and we still (indiscernible). We have so much work to do to make sure that this early childhood education thrives.

But, the one thing that I heard today from everyone who sat here and spoke is that you want to do partnership. That is the one thing. It's just that the partnership (indiscernible) is not really (indiscernible). So, we have to work on that.

So, I thank you for being here today and sharing your thoughts with us.

Thank you, Chairman.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

Any other questions from the Committee? (no response)

Thank you, Althea.

One question as it relates to how you're going to implement this in the Robbinsville School District? I just want to see if Chris is paying attention. He is; good.

Thank you all.

I -- you know, we-- Senator Turner, as I look around, has probably been the only one who has been through this. The end of a two-term governor, so in about 18 months there is likely -- statistically -- a new DOE commissioner, a new everything. So, we're in an interesting situation where we obviously want to try to bring some positive changes around this,

and that will be through lobbying -- Senator Henry, it could be way worse; we'll see.

It's-- We'll see. And, I am very hopeful. We've only had a couple meetings with Acting Commissioner Dehmer. He's been there for maybe two months, and he really has been great on this issue, our conversations. I'm very hopeful on a lot of it. I don't know if we're going to get everything. But, I do think we need to put some of this into law, and we need to create a framework for the future as we go through various different commissioners.

So, I know there's a lot of members here. I would encourage you to please reach out to your Senator and your Assembly people, please, if it's not anything you heard today. We have a lot of folks' written testimony; I hope the members will read everybody's written testimony. But, please, meet with your State legislators. Our ability to get this done is going to be based on how much support we can garner, how many co-sponsors we can garner.

We heard a lot of the same things as it relates to spacing and curricula and contracts and all that, but if there's other things. And, obviously, there will be a process when this bill eventually gets done in partnership with everyone on this Committee -- that it will go through the committee process and obviously there will be changes on that. But, what's most important is wherever you live and wherever your center is, please reach out to your State Senator and your Assembly people, because as we go into our respective caucuses, it's up to us to garner support, and if folks aren't hearing from their legislators it's going to be harder to get this done.

So, thank you all for being here.

Have a great day.

**(MEETING CONCLUDED)**