
Committee Meeting

of

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

*“The Committee will meet to take testimony on issues regarding preschool
and early childhood education”*

LOCATION: Meeting via Zoom

DATE: February 8, 2023
12:00 p.m.

MEMBERS OF COMMITTEE PRESENT:

Senator Joseph P. Cryan, Co-Chair
Assemblywoman Mila M. Jasey, Co-Chair
Senator Renee C. Burgess
Senator Declan J. O’Scanlon, Jr.
Senator Michael L. Testa, Jr.
Senator Samuel D. Thompson
Assemblyman Ralph R. Caputo
Assemblywoman Victoria A. Flynn
Assemblywoman Michele Matsikoudis
Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson
Assemblyman Erik K. Simonsen
Assemblyman Benjie E. Wimberly



ALSO PRESENT:

Rebecca DiBenedetti
Executive Director

Ivy Pomper
Executive Assistant

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

SENATE

Hon. James Beach
Hon. Renee C. Burgess
Hon. Joseph P. Cryan
Hon. Declan J. O'Scanlon, Jr.
Hon. Michael L. Testa
Hon. Samuel D. Thompson



JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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MEETING NOTICE

TO: Members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools

The Joint Committee on the Public Schools will meet on Wednesday, February 8, at 12:00 p.m., via Zoom to take testimony on issues regarding preschool and early childhood education.

The public may address comments and questions to Rebecca DiBenedetti, Executive Director, at 609-847-3365, or by email at Rsapp@njleg.org

Issued January 15, 2023

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ASSEMBLYWOMAN MILA M. JASEY (Co-Chair):

Becky, if you would call the roll, please.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Sure.

Senator Burgess said she was going to be just a little late.

Senator O'Scanlon. (no response)

I know he's signed in.

Senator Testa.

SENATOR TESTA: Present.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Senator Thompson. (no response)

Senator Thompson *is* here.

Assemblyman Caputo.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: Present.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblywoman Flynn.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FLYNN: Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblywoman Matsikoudis just joined us -- she's here.

Assemblywoman Reynolds-Jackson.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: And, Assemblymen Simonsen and Wimberly will be running late.

Assemblywoman Jasey.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Present.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: And, Senator Cryan.

SENATOR JOSEPH P. CRYAN (Co-Chair): Here.

SENATOR O'SCANLON: And, Senator O'Scanlon is here, and I've figured out how to unmute, finally.

(laughter)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I still find it a challenge, honestly.

OK, so I have a brief opening, and then we will start with, let's see: Andrés Acebo -- I don't know if I pronounced your name correctly -- because I understand you have a time constraint. Is that correct?

A N D R É S A C E B O: That's correct, thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: All right.

So, first of all, it's great to see everybody. And, I appreciate your getting on and joining us for this.

This issue of early-childhood education has been one of paramount importance to me because of my interests in the concerns of women and children and the reality that it is, more often than not, that women who care for -- it's women who care for and teach our children during their early years, be it at home, daycare, and in school.

And, I will -- as an aside, I will tell you, I feel like I'm reliving this all over again through my grandchildren, because they range in age from 1 to 14. But, we have several who are in daycare, or preschool, or pre-K, and, unfortunately, the systems are still not synced. And, so, it's a lot on parents and caretakers to navigate the services.

In the interest in keeping this introduction brief, I will allow our invited guests to address the substantive and compelling issues of the mechanics and the economics, and focus my remarks on its importance.

We know from the 50 years and counting the success of the Head Start Program, which began in 1965 and has served millions of children and families living in poverty through comprehensive early learning,

health, nutrition, and family support services. Children who attend Head Start demonstrate marked academic and social progress, and are more likely to enter kindergarten ready to learn.

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University is dedicated to assisting parents, caregivers, practitioners, and policymakers; understand the importance of early childhood development; and why the birth through 5 years is a foundation for not just the child, but a prosperous and sustainable society.

Understanding this critical time in the life of a child, in 2016, I introduced with then-Speaker Vinnie Prieto, and in conjunction with the nonprofit pre-K Our Way, a substantial preschool expansion bill. I described it as the beginning of a long campaign to prove to lawmakers and the public that high-quality preschool is necessary. Although that measure failed to gain traction, thanks to us as a Legislature, and Governor Murphy working in concert with the Department of Education Division of Early Childhood Education, school districts have seen significant funding allocated to creating and expanding preschool programs.

Prior to the 2000 *Abbott v. Burke* decision, there was no such thing as the P-3 teaching endorsement. Our Supreme Court found that teacher certification is “Unquestionably an important component of any preschool education program,” which was the catalyst for our four-year higher-ed. institutions to create specialized training in early childhood education. Today, 100% of Abbott preschool teachers have degrees and the P-3 endorsement.

Today's hearing will focus upon where what pre-K and P-3 education looks like today and where we are, and should be -- and where we should be headed during these critical, formative years.

So, with that, I would like to ask-- And, I'm happy that we have a two-hour timeslot, although I know some people may not be able to stay for the whole time. I'm hoping that we will have enough time not only to hear the testimony of the people who are joining us -- our guests -- but also have a discussion as well.

So, I'd like to start with the Interim President of New Jersey City University, Andrés Acebo. And, I hope I pronounced that correctly.

Is he there?

MR. ACEBO: I am here; I apologize. I was just unmuting myself.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: OK.

MR. ACEBO: And, yes, you pronounced it -- you pronounced it perfectly, thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Mm-hmm.

MR. ACEBO: Assemblywoman Jasey and honorable members of the Joint Committee on Public Schools, it is a privilege and an honor to join you here today, and to pledge my support and this institution's support to be a driver of this important mission and this important work as a re-emerging and a dedicated anchor institution in the community that desperately needs it -- one that is indispensable.

I think-- And, I have colleagues, and I see folks like Cynthia Rice from Advocates for Children of New Jersey, who I have had the

pleasure of speaking with recently; two weeks on the job, but a lifetime of being a beneficiary of the work that all of you do here on and off the Zoom screen.

I guess the mission, I think, is something that I want to emphasize here. And, you may have read headlines about some things that have been pronounced as out of some austerity considerations that the university had been exploring. I want to, here, very publicly, tell you that values dictate judgements, and my values are completely centered around championing early-childhood education in our program. And, pronouncements about needing to revisit or sunseting some of them, or ones that the buck will ultimately stop with me and my ultimate recommendations to the board. But, I am working with a very dedicated faculty and staff at this institution and community stakeholders, both at our neighboring community college -- Hudson Community College and Essex County Community College -- of which are feeder programs for us to meet the demands of our community.

But, I can wax ad nauseum about the empirical data that all of you will be versed in before I even set foot on this -- on camera. And, I think the promise of the work here in this investment -- it's what it is: an investment in our future -- is one that there's empirical data to champion and support. But, sometimes, the most compelling is the anecdotal, right?

I stand before you today as a proud product of a public school education, having been born and raised in Union City, New Jersey, an Abbott district that afforded me unparalleled opportunities. Much will be said about my age, but I think here is an advantage, that I'm young enough to have siblings who benefited from that 2000 decision and the enhancement

of early childhood programs for my sisters. And, as a father of three young children -- one of which, my youngest, has been a direct beneficiary of some of these expansion efforts in my own community, to combat the learning loss that he suffered throughout the pandemic and the achievement gap that persisted, and the early intervention that he ultimately needed that has been imperfect, but resources that otherwise, you know, his progress and milestone attainments would have been beyond reach. And, that's the work that, both in private child-care settings and in the public sector now and public investment, make my son's progress and that of all our children and grandchildren much more viable.

And, so, that's what I'm here to say, which is urging this Committee to do all you can to find partners in folks like us to champion this investment. We can have lost the aspirations, and spend hundreds of millions of dollars on physical structures on campus -- college campuses -- or, we can invest in programs that invest in people and a future.

And, NJCU is no secret -- it made headlines long before I had this seat, sat in this role. I am committed to seeing this institution through its current austerity challenges, but I desperately need the State to be a partner, because as we -- and, Cynthia Rice and others can speak to the things that NJCU presents. You know, we began as a normal school in 1927, a deep legacy of shaping and molding educators. Again, a direct beneficiary of that mission because of where I grew up. You know, the very people -- the graduates of this institution -- educated me, so there's a deep connection there, of seeing this institution's mission fulfilled, that I get to stand before you today. It's because of a lot of hard work and dedication of a lot of people, particularly educators.

And, this institution is uniquely poised to address the demands of expanding early-childhood education, particularly in communities of color; communities like the ones that I come from; the ones that shaped me and molded me. Two hundred school districts statewide are implementing full-day state-funded pre-schools, 10 of which are located right here in my home county of Hudson County. The program is reaching nearly 60,000 3- and 4-year-olds, at a cost of approximately \$1 billion. And, we know -- again, the empirical data and the anecdotal both shore up the same conclusions, which is that cultural sensitivity, cultural acuity, and acumen of having and educating the population that serves its population, that we invest in the communities that we support is incredibly important. We prepare more teachers of color than any of our peer institutions. Eighty percent of my students self-identify -- undergraduates -- self-identify as people of color, and 60% of our graduate students *are* students of color.

NJCU is the state's oldest and longest-serving Hispanic-serving, minority-serving institution of higher education -- public institution -- with the most socioeconomically diverse student population. The median household income of my students is \$42,000 a year -- median. Median -- a \$42,000 household income in the State of New Jersey, in northern New Jersey. And, the folks who we educate work in their own communities, and they understand and appreciate the challenges that afflict our community disproportionately.

And, these statewide investments in our population are critically important, and anchor institutions of higher education like NJCU in particular are drivers of social and economic mobility. And, that's at the basis of why we invest, right, in early childhood: Recognizing that the earlier

we tap into a child's potential, we change the trajectory of their lives. And, on my campus every single day, crisscrossing it are people in pursuit of a noble ambition, which is just the prospect of a better life. And, it shouldn't happen once they get to college.

And, that's why it's a pleasure to be invited to conversations like this; that we recognize that, if that's when the focus happens, it's far too late.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

I appreciate that, and I look forward to meeting you.

MR. ACEBO: Likewise; likewise, I do, too.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you so much.

Are there any questions or comments from members?

Yes, Senator Cryan.

SENATOR CRYAN: First off, Mr. President, thank you very much for joining us today.

And, good luck on what is clearly a challenge before you.

MR. ACEBO: Thank you, Senator.

SENATOR CRYAN: Reading some of the testimony that we're about to hear, folks talk about staffing levels; you touched upon it in your comments. I think all of us wonder, though, about moving the next generation of folks into the educational field. Whether it's in pre-K, or whether it's in teaching.

You touched upon it -- folks of color, that sort of thing -- but, I think all of us agree that there's been a disinterest in that, for the current forecast.

Can you comment on that a little bit, or what things-- Again, you've got a whole map in front of you. But, what you've seen, or any comments that you could give for insight for the group?

MR. ACEBO: I do.

I think the thing is that the pandemic had a disproportionate impact on our community and in certain disciplines in particular. The education workforce, much like the health-care workforce, had disproportionate stress levels.

And, I think what I'm seeing -- what I'm confronting -- is how do we enhance the teacher preparation work so that we have a workforce that is malleable to challenges? I think investing in recruiting and having community partnerships and liaisons, particularly with the K-12 districts, where there are pipelines where we elevate people from within that very community, I think is of critical importance.

And, I think that recognizing that there are non-traditional paths -- I think making it easier for people to enter these stations and these offices of employment. I think the State has historically done a great job -- of course, we could always do better -- of enhancing the alternative routes to these professions, and lifting some of the barriers to it that recognizes that life experiences matter.

I have, in my community in particular, child-care workers who are uniquely positioned to be -- because of their experience as caretakers and caregivers -- to be nurturing educators. And, streamlining those pathlines -- pipelines, I should say -- I think is incredibly important.

And, Senator, thank you for the opportunity and for recognizing the challenges that I am owning here, at my institution.

I will say that that's where most critically in order to answer that call I need State investment. That goes beyond dealing with the things that my students confront. They're a product of these very communities that they go back in to serving.

So, if my students are working and learning in classrooms that are too cold in the winter and too hot in the summer, while flagship institutions are getting hundreds of millions of dollars to build, you know, important institutional means, but my conditions are dilapidating -- those are things that plague us. I think what I would want to leave you with is that the focus should be about economic stimulus and how higher education in particular serves that purpose. I am committed to doing that in my tenure as President of this institution and making sure that every time that the State invests in a public anchor institution, particularly one of higher education, that the dollar circulates in my community multiple times before it leaves it and empowers the community that it serves.

SENATOR CRYAN: Well, I think it's safe to say NJCU has found an advocate in the office.

MR. ACEBO: Thank you.

SENATOR CRYAN: Good for you.

MR. ACEBO: Thank you.

SENATOR CRYAN: And, thank you very much for your comments.

MR. ACEBO: Thank you, sir.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

And, I look -- we look forward -- to working with you and hearing more from you. I think everything you said was very much on point-

MR. ACEBO: Thank you very much.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: --and a good intro to this morning's discussion.

MR. ACEBO: Thank you very much.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

Next up, I would like to ask Dr. Steve Barnett, Co-Director of the National Institute of Early Education Research, and Karin Garver, Early Childhood Education Policy Specialist from the National Institute.

The floor is yours.

W. S T E V E N B A R N E T T, Ph.D.: Thank you so much. It's a great honor to speak with you today on this topic. It's at least one of the most important topics that you'll deal with this year.

As you heard, I'm Steve Barnett. I am a Board of Governors Professor at Rutgers, and Senior Co-Director of the Institute.

We've divided up the presentation between me and Karin Garver. I am going to give you some background and introduction to the issues. You have my slideshow in a handout, and I'll take you through that. I am going to skim over some of the things that I think you're familiar with and spend some more time on things you may be less familiar with.

I want to start with saying, though, that -- you know, as we move through the first page -- that near the Institute's studies, Pre-K policies in every state, and we rank and rate them every year. And, it's fair to say that New Jersey has one of the most-- if not *the* most; one of the best, if not

the best -- pre-K programs in the country. And, the foundation for this is the high expectations for learning and teaching that we have, and the high standards for the program that make that possible.

We also have rigorous research that the Institute has done on the long-term benefits. I want to talk about some of those. And, those are made possible only because we have such high expectations and standards, and because we put funding behind those.

Now, I think there's questions about whether the funding had remained adequate. That's a question that we'll be addressing in response to requests from the State. And, of course, as you all know, most preschoolers in New Jersey don't have access to this excellent program, and that's really the (indiscernible) key issue.

So, I want to move on to the next -- just quickly review. This is a program that starts at age 3. That's very unusual. There are really only four other states in the country that begin their program -- three states and D.C. -- that begin their pre-K programs with 3-year-olds. As you'll see, that's important for the results that we get. We ensure that there's adequate time in the day; that there are strong teachers, as you heard from Assemblywoman Jasey, that these teachers are all highly qualified.

There's also strong and appropriate curriculum, good space requirements, and a continuous improvement system -- this is really important -- a continuous improvement system that ensures that the program does what it's supposed to do. And, of course, this is done in a mixed-delivery system of public and private providers.

So, moving onto the next slide in that deck, I want to just briefly review the findings of our research. We studied programs as they were

implemented in the Abbott Districts while we were still getting up to speed, but after we had sufficient quality to make this happen. And, we know that the program transformed the quality of the early childhood programs that children in New Jersey have, moving us from really poor-to-mediocre quality, to the vast majority of programs being good to excellent -- an incredible transformation, largely with the same teachers who went to school; got their degrees and certifications; doubled their pay; and became much more effective teachers of our young children.

The results of this are achievement effects that are substantial and lasted at least through 10th grade. And, I only say 10th grade, because that's as far as we've been able to follow them so far; not that they end there. The effects were roughly twice as large for children who started at 3 as when they started at 4; that these effects are big enough to close 30 or 40% of the achievement gap. Think about that. As a community-wide impact. If children went for two years, grade retention -- these children who had to repeat a grade because they failed -- was reduced by 15 percentage points; special education needs was reduced by 7 percentage points. These are very large impacts in our most disadvantaged communities. So, this is basically why it matters so much that the program expands to reach all of the children who can benefit from this.

So, the next set of slides are really about who gets served, who doesn't get served at 3 and at 4. The next two slides show access to New Jersey's pre-K program and other pre-K programs, including private. At 3 and 4, as you can see, most children don't have access to the public program, and many don't attend pre-K at all; especially at age 3.

And, then, if we move to the next slide beyond that, you'll see that this third slide really shows how much progress we've made and how far we have to go. There's about 210,000 preschoolers and 3- and 4-year-olds in New Jersey every year. We now have the capacity, thanks to the investments that you've made in recent years, and you can see how these went up year by year, to serve about a third -- about 70,000 of the kids. Now, that leaves us with a long ways to go, but we also have to acknowledge that probably not every one of those 210,000 will attend public pre-K. So, some of them might attend private -- continue to attend -- private programs, just as some children in New Jersey attend private school in K-12.

So, we've been working on what's a realistic goal, what can we expect? We don't have a solid answer to that yet. It's possible it's 95%; we think it's more realistic in the 70-90% range. That means there's somewhere between 75,000 and 120,000 children who we still need to provide access. That translates into 5,000 to 7,500, maybe 8,000 new classrooms; new teachers; new teacher assistants. That's a lot of classrooms; that's a lot of teachers to prepare.

Now, fortunately, because we work with a mixed-delivery system, we don't need all new facilities; we don't need all new teachers. Just as when we ramped up in five years in the Abbott Districts under court order, we can take the teachers who we have in private programs and provide them with the supports to become fully qualified. We can work with facilities that we have. They're going to need upgrades, and some facilities may not be able to meet the standards. But, it doesn't all have to be new. Pre-K expansion can enhance existing programs in the private sector, in Head Start, and, also, the teaching staff who work there. And the leadership.

So, if we move onto the last slide, what are the big issues? And, Karin is going to talk some more about these and reframe them in terms of the strategic plan. But, I pulled them out this way because I think it's easy -- it makes it easier to understand, what do we need to be on top of as a state if we're going to roll this out over the next 10 to 15 years? Teacher and assistant preparation and training -- taking the teachers we have and getting them to be the teachers they want to be and that we need, as well as bringing new people into the field, developing the leaders and coaches and other supporting staff who are needed for the program.

There is an increasingly diverse and multilingual population in New Jersey. We need to be developing the expertise to support them, supporting our world languages goals, as well as our goals in English. We have tremendous resources in our communities because of their diversity, but we need to invest to make sure we can take advantage of that.

Facilities development -- remember again, that's 5,000 to 8,000 classrooms. State agency capacity is really important. The reason we get strong results -- or have gotten strong results for kids and their families -- is because we've invested in a continuous improvement system that works at every level, from the child and the teacher, to the center, to the district, to the State. And, that's required State capacities -- State agency staff who have content knowledge, who know about early learning; social and emotional development; mathematics in the preschool; the science of reading; all of these things that are so important. To make sure that we have an early childhood program that delivers, and that can support the districts in watching these programs and building their quality so that we get results.

And, we have to invest in the capacity to ensure that that

happens. We have fewer staff now who can do this work at the Department of Ed. than when we had only 31 Abbott Districts to work with. So, there's a big need there.

Then, of course, integrating -- as the Chair noted -- integrating pre-K and child care and Head Start and preschool special education into a coherent system. That takes work, and human capacity as well as organizational capacity and funding.

And, then, finally, working on adequate funding for mature as well as new participants statewide. There's startup costs for new programs, but as programs mature; as teachers reach that tenure mark, when they have 10 and 15 or more years into the system; and leaders; the costs go up. And, we have to make sure that we have the resources to adequately pay for those.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Dr. Barnett, I appreciate that. My head is spinning.

DR. BARNETT: As are ours. (laughter)

Karin Garver.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblywoman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblyman Caputo has a question.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Oh, yes, I apologize.

Assemblyman.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: I thought this was easy.

Steve, thank you so much for your presentation, I appreciated that.

Obviously, the work being done is tremendously important, and that's why we made that investment, and that's why I commend our Chairwoman for holding this hearing today.

But, what I'm concerned about is what did we learn through COVID? What kind of damage was done in terms of staffing, level of program, etc.? Because we just can't ignore what's happened over the last two or three years. It seems to be, you know, it should be a whole different approach -- or, let's put it this way, a more accelerated approach, because of what has occurred.

So, I'm going to throw that question out to you.

DR. BARNETT: Senator, you make a--

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: Assemblyman. Don't promote me, I'm in trouble as it is.

DR. BARNETT: As extremely -- you know, that's an extremely important point. COVID has wreaked havoc with our programs, and with our families.

We have a nationwide study of families of 3- and 4-year-olds who tell us their children missed out on a lot. They're mostly back, that's the good news. But, families are actually still struggling to provide the learning supports in the home, and, so, children are entering preschool and kindergarten with much higher social-emotional needs to be addressed. I've had a much more difficult time developing the social skills, just making friends when you don't see anybody, right, or when you're kept at -- you're social distancing. It's been incredibly difficult.

And, the stresses in children's homes have stressed them out, and they haven't been getting the book reading at home that they need to, because their parents are overwhelmed and stressed.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: This is a more realistic picture of what we're dealing with.

DR. BARNETT: Absolutely, and--

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: But, we have goals, and we have objectives, in terms of trying to reach a higher level of delivery of services.

But, when you speak like this to the truth, what kind of services can we get out there, in terms of social workers, psychologists? These kids are dealing with huge problems in terms of anxiety, depression, etc. So - And, at that young age, they're kind of quiet about it, so it's difficult to communicate and get that kind of information, but the teacher can observe it.

And, then, the other thing is the teachers have had tremendous amount of stress. We lost staff -- how much staff members we lost over the last two or three years?

DR. BARNETT: And, that's the great news. Our preschool program -- the State has really invested in maintaining the capacity.

Because we have class sizes of 15, teachers can really address a lot of these with supports from the teams that districts provide. So, the preschool program is really well-equipped, because of the design and the resources. But, as you've heard, only about a third of our kids have access to that. So, two-thirds of them aren't getting this.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CAPUTO: Isn't that always the way it is? Certain kids are left out? That's always the way it works.

DR. BARNETT: This is why what you're doing and what the State is doing to plan for expansion is so vitally important.

And, of course, there are things that districts can do right now with summer programs; with Ramp Up; with after school; before school; additional staff. And, the monies that they've received to support this stuff, it is important that they go into these activities. So, it is never one thing, and a preschool--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CAPUTO: Well, at that level weren't not--

DR. BARNETT: --certainly can't do this alone--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CAPUTO: At that level, we're not suffering the staff loss? Loss of staff at that level?

DR. BARNETT: Well, I think it's tight in every district. How much of this is the pandemic, and how much of this is the tightest labor market in 46 years is hard to tell. And, that may require that we're going to have to invest in making teaching -- not just in early childhood, but you have to make sure it's well paid. We have to make sure it's respected, that they have good working conditions, and all of the supports that enable them to be effective.

Those are all the kinds of things that the State has put in place with pre-K. And, I think if we just make sure that the resources are there to do what the program is supposed to do, we will be able to attract sufficient staff in teaching, and all of those work positions.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: Right now we're not at that level.

DR. BARNETT: You know, I don't have real-time information on that, other than anecdotes to tell you it's tight and they're struggling, but I think they're holding on.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: OK, great.

Thank you, sir.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, thank you.

And, I want to give Karin Garver the next opportunity to add to what we've heard so far.

And, because I want everyone to have time -- and members to have time for questions as well -- I'm going to ask that we try to move it up a little bit.

If we want to hear new information, insights, ideas, plans, and what is needed -- what you need from us.

OK, Karin, the floor is yours.

Thank you.

KARIN A. GARVER: Thanks so much, and, I'll just echo Steve's thanks.

It's an honor, the opportunity to testify, and hopefully I can build a bit more on what Steve already spoke about.

And, I think you all also have a presentation of mine, hopefully, in front of you as well.

So, moving right into the first slide, one of the hallmarks of New Jersey's high-quality preschool program is our mixed-delivery model.

And, I'd like to talk a bit about that today and that in the context of preschool expansion in New Jersey.

Mixed delivery in public preschool programs means that children are being served in a variety of different settings, including public schools and private child-care centers, which also includes Head Start agencies. So, regardless of where children are being served, participating providers are required to meet the same standards of quality.

In New Jersey, the way it works is that funding flows from the Department of Education to school districts, who then collaborate with child-care providers. And, in a contract that establishes a collaborative relationship between school districts and child-care providers, stipulating that the providers are still responsible for hiring their own staff; that the school district is ultimately responsible for the programmatic and financial oversight of the program.

So, moving into the next slide, the majority of children in our public preschool program in New Jersey were once served in child-care centers. You can see here that in the 2005-2006 school year, 57% of children were served through contracts with child-care centers -- and, that number is actually 67% in just the Abbott district.

But, as the Abbott districts have continued to mature, and, as the number of districts participating in the state's preschool program has decreased, we've seen a shift in where children are being served. So, by the 2020-2021 school year, we observed that almost 60% of children were now being served in public school settings, and this shift is evident across all districts, but is most common in our Abbott district.

On the next slide, you see a little bit more about what mixed delivery means in New Jersey. And, in our Abbott districts, they're required through a Supreme Court decision to contract with what we call "willing and able" child-care providers, when space isn't available in school district buildings. And, although that policy is still in place, we're still seeing that significant decline in the percentage of children in contracted centers. And, that "willing and able" policy doesn't apply to other school districts in the state. Those districts are encouraged to collaborate with child-care providers. But, right now, only 36% of school districts that were approved to start or expand preschool since 2018 are currently contracting the child-care center.

NIEER conducted a survey of districts that are eligible to apply for preschool funding, and districts that were recently approved to expand their programs. And, the majority of the districts cited a lack of available space in the district as a major barrier to expansion. But, they also expressed reluctance to work the childcare centers, and confusion about how New Jersey's mixed delivery system is intended to work.

Moving on to the next slide, without mixed delivery, we're unlikely to achieve universal access to public preschool in New Jersey. Mixed delivery offers us the fastest, least expensive route to universal public preschool, because it maximizes the use of existing resources like classroom space, program staff, materials, and supplies. Other advantages are that we strengthen rather than disrupt our child-care system -- that includes services for infants and toddlers; helps us to facilitate parent access to facilities in your home or work while minimizing transportation costs. Also, mixed delivery maximizes our opportunities to coordinate Federal Head Start and child-care funds with State education funds. And, also, Head Start and child-care

leaders and staff have substantial expertise in early childhood, as well as extensive knowledge of the communities they serve. So, strengthening the State's mixed-delivery system has been a critical aspect of NIEER's work with the State to create a strategic plan for preschool expansion.

So, the next slide, I'd like to give you a quick summary of our work with strategic planning. In 2021, Governor Murphy and the Department of Education started contracting with NIEER to craft a strategic plan outlining the major policy considerations for expanding high-quality preschool in New Jersey.

The plan was released in October 2022, and it covers four broad areas: The funding and scaling to universal access section addresses options for how the State can prioritize the low lot of preschool expansion by targeting certain children or regions of the state, and how to determine appropriate funding rates.

The facility section looks at options for improving existing space to serve preschoolers, and, as Steve mentioned, funding to support new space for preschool classrooms in public and non-public settings. It addresses the need to align facility standards between DOE and DCF, acknowledging differences in square-footage requirements between the State pre-K program and our child-care licensing system. And, it outlines some options for countywide facilities planning.

There's also a workforce section, also in line with what Steve was talking about, addressing ways to support teachers -- particularly in child-care centers to obtain the credentials they need to teach in our State preschool classrooms, through scholarships and through partnerships between two- and four-year colleges and universities, and explores ways to

increase both the number and the diversity of teachers who are teaching in our public preschool classrooms.

The final section of this strategic plan addresses the importance of mixed delivery and our public preschool program, and acknowledges that the State needs these strong public-private partnerships to provide a high-quality program to all preschoolers, while also maintaining that robust system of care we need for our infants and toddlers.

And, then, our last slide -- NIEER is now working with the State to craft an implementation plan for preschool expansion. Between October 2022 and January 2023, we conducted 14 stakeholders engagement sessions reaching 36 organizations and over 100 participants across New Jersey to get feedback on the strategic plan and to inform the development of an implementation plan and we're now working with the DOE to organize a session to share information with licensed child-care providers from across the state. The implementation plan will consist of 21 reports mapping the current status of preschool expansion in every county, and what's needed to expand further. The reports will include information about demographics and demographic trends; the status of existing preschool classrooms in need for new classrooms in both public and nonpublic settings; qualifications of our existing preschool workforce; and, as Steve mentioned, the estimated need for new teaching staff; as well as the availability of the coursework they need to become certified State pre-K teachers.

Most of the information in the county reports is being gathered from administrative and survey data, but we're also conducting a series of meetings with school districts and private child-care providers in every county to capture what they see as the major challenges and possible

opportunities on the road to preschool expansion. So, the data from those 21 county reports will eventually be compiled into a statewide report which will include projected long-term needs for funding and staffing, as well as recommendations for revised per-child rates.

We are grateful to be working closely with the Governor's Office and the Department of Education to complete this work that we know is so crucial to meet the goal of expanding preschool further in the state.

Thank you so much, and I'm happy to take any questions.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, that was very encouraging to hear.

And, I know I personally look forward to reading that report when it's done so that we can see where (indiscernible) to be channeled.

Are there any questions that members wish to ask? (no response)

If not, I'd like to ask--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BURGESS: I have one question, Assemblywoman.

How are you? How is everybody?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Good. Good to see you.

SENATOR BURGESS: Thank you for that presentation.

I was just wondering, real quick, on that data that's coming out on the 21 counties -- would it actually specify what schools have been observed and, you know, exactly where the data is coming from so we can get a better understanding on the demographics?

MS. GARVER: Absolutely.

So, we planned to include in the report an appendix that will have all of the raw data that we're using district by district that will be, really, enough to talk about it on a county level, but we'll be providing district-by-district data in each county report.

SENATOR BURGESS: Awesome.

Thank you, Karin.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, that's a great question, Senator. Thank you for asking that.

Let's see. Flora -- and, I apologize, I don't know how to pronounce your last name. Would you pronounce it for me?

F L O R A E N C A R N A C A O: En-car-na-sow.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Encarnacao, OK.

Superintendent of the Kearny School District, and you are going to talk about preschool expansion using the mixed-delivery model of public preschool, Head Start, and child-care education.

The floor is yours.

MS. ENCARNACAO: Thank you. Thanks.

Good afternoon, everyone, and I am honored to have the opportunity to speak before you and tell you Kearny's story.

So, before we were accepted with the State grant, we were running six classrooms throughout the district for preschool that were half-day programs. And, so, we were awarded the grant in the fall of 2019 -- so, that was the year of COVID, the school year for COVID -- and, since then, we now service 23 4-year-old preschool classrooms, five preschool 3-year-old classrooms, and five preschool disabled classrooms in the district. We also

partner with one Head Start classroom in town and one private provider, with an additional private provider who's coming on board for next school year.

So, right now we have a total of 35 classrooms that are running preschool programs, and we're meeting over 50% of our eligible universe. So, we're pretty proud of those statistics, given that we started the year of COVID and what we've been able to do despite COVID up until this point.

And, so, it was a lot of dedication on my part and my master teacher -- I was Director of Curriculum at that time -- to pull all of this together. And, I have to say, having NIEER support, Beth Gardiner, ACNJ, Cynthia Rice -- being able to reach out to them; meet with them; ask them questions; have them sit with me; it was so instrumental in the success of the rollout. So, that goes without saying, providing support to district leaders when they implement this process.

We were very methodical in the way we went about it, and we did reach out to every private provider in town. And, we explained what we were doing, and, you know, there were two reasons for that: Obviously we were looking for potential partners, but, also, we wanted them to understand what was taking place, what they could take advantage of if they chose to, and, really, to have them on our side. We didn't want any angst from these private business owners that we were essentially taking their children and impacting their business.

And, so, that was positive, and we came to the conclusion for most that they either didn't meet the criteria that we needed in terms of the square footage, the curriculum, the certificated teacher, etc., or they weren't interested to partner with us. And, so, we consistently look through

that and vet them and keep that open line of communication so that if there is a potential partner, that they're still able to come on board, and that's what's taking place with the one we're currently working with for next year.

It is a burden on district resources. I think that's why you'll see that many are hesitant to go down that road with the private providers, because there is a lot of hand holding that's needed to bring them up to the standard that meets the expectations for high quality and what we do in the district. So, it was a lot of time spent in the classroom; a lot of time with the director; a lot of time with the director meeting with our business administrator trying to understand how to go about managing the funds, etc.

So, that's a bit of a heavy lift, and I can tell you, with the provider that we're looking to partner with for next school year, there is some concern -- even though she has some things that she's going to do to bring the facility up to standards -- there are some pieces that are lacking considerably, and she needs funding for. And, she indicated to us that she had applied for a grant, she's waiting to hear back, and hopefully that kicks in so that we feel comfortable in partnering with her, that, again, it's up to the standard that we need it to be at.

In our district, one of the reasons why we were able to expand as quickly as we did is because we had a charter open up in the community. So, while that was a negative for us in other aspects, it was a positive in that it opened up some classroom space. And, then, it was just us being very creative in adjusting our facilities to try to capture as many potential classrooms as possible.

And, so, I would have to say that it's so crucial to have this program in place. It's a good start to their education, a solid start to providing

them supports they may not have at home; structures that they're lacking, especially now. And, one of the best outcomes that I've enjoyed experiencing through this is early intervention and the ability to really identify those potential struggles as soon as possible and addressing them, whether they academic or behavioral. It's been really a pleasure and fulfilling to see that happen and to help them along in their education. And, we know that the fruits of that, we see over time as they go along in the grade levels.

And, also, that connection with the community. We would not have had that if we were not seeking out these private providers, and the ones who we are working with and the ones who we still have conversations with, it provides that connection. We're all in this together, which is also fantastic.

I know Assemblyman Caputo had asked about the challenges that we're seeing now. And, so, really it's the behaviors that were typical -- or *are* typical -- in 2-year-olds. We're seeing them now in the 4-year-olds because they have that gap because of COVID. So, it is those social-emotional skills; the play skills; the fine motor skills; the self care; the toileting skills; language articulation; processing information; forming sentences; and self-regulation. And, so that is an added burden -- an added challenge -- to the teaching staff that are still recovering, are still tired from COVID, and not fully equipped the way we would be with the 3- and 4-year-olds in how to handle these complex scenarios that we're dealing with.

But, on the positive side, we do see children making a lot of progress at this point and really recovering those gaps that they had. And, there's a greater turnout by families; family involvement. We've seen a great increase in that, families who are more receptive to our community resources.

The ability to video conference -- glass half full, because of COVID, it allows us to have more increased communication. And, overall, parents who really are more invested in preschool education for their children.

So, overall, it's been a very rewarding, very fulfilling -- a lot of hard work, but great to see what we've been able to pull together in our district and what we continue to do for our students.

So, that's my story -- Kearny's story.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Well, it's very interesting, too, because as you're speaking, I'm thinking about children who I know in those age groups, and you're right -- they're delayed. But, they also catch up pretty quickly, I think, the earlier we intervene with them.

So, one of the things that would be great to come out of this discussion is some specific things -- specific interventions that districts need to help us get our kids back on track. We're not going to talk about that today, but I think that's something we need to follow up on.

Do I have any members who wish to ask a question, or can we go on to Joselyn Estevez-Vargas, who is Vice President of Early Childhood Programs, HOPES Community Action Partnership? (no response)

OK, Estella -- Joselyn. I apologize.

J O S E L Y N E S T E V E Z - V A R G A S: Not a problem.

Yes, good afternoon to the members of the Joint Committee and all the distinguished guests. I am honored to be part of this panel.

A lot of information has been shared from the research point of view; from the higher education point of view; the district's point of view. So, I am representing providers.

HOPES CAP Inc. is not only an early Head Start provider, but also collaborates with two districts through the former Abbott district, and two preschool expansion districts. So, we serve over 1,200 children in four different communities: Hoboken, Plainfield, Manville, and Franklin.

But, today, apart from my role as a direct provider and contracted partner with four districts, I also represent New Jersey's child-care providers throughout the state who have been partnering and we're having conversations about the impact that preschool expansion has had on our programs, our staffing, and our families. So, we are strong supporters of the state's mixed-delivery system and we want to continue to support that process, but, also, want the Committee to be aware of some of the challenges that we face.

For the past couple of years, we've been working with staff at the Department of Education, members of the Senate and Assembly, and also with the Governor's Office, bringing to light some of the challenges that former Abbot districts have been facing -- or former Abbott district providers have been facing, whether they're Head Start or child care.

You know, we believe that the existing preschool formula structure for child-care programs has led to varying and inequitable levels of quality for the young children in New Jersey. And, it's really steered away from the original intent of the Supreme Court in the Abbott v. Burke decision. You know, we are longstanding partners -- some of us have been partners with districts from the beginning of the Abbott preschool program -- and continue to be partners as preschool expansion is rolled out.

We hope that some of the issues that I'll bring to light today, you know, we find solutions together because we want to ensure that

every child in New Jersey has access to high-quality and equitable preschool experience. And, we've heard a little bit about some of the challenges that we have in reaching all of the children who should be receiving preschool services.

First, I want to bring to light -- and, I'm not sure if the Committee is aware -- that when the Abbott law was passed and the 30 districts were partnered with providers and Head Start programs, the funding structure was set up so that 75% of it came from DOE and 25% came from DHS. Through the years, and as the program has grown and expanded, this has shifted, and the DHS funding -- the part that was supposed to cover 25% of the budget -- is basically gone because the eligibility for those funds changed.

So, this reduction, you know, has really resulted in programs having a structural deficit when starting off in their budget. So, we are playing catch-up all the time. This has really resulted in us having challenges and retaining our staff, because public schools have access to more funding, more benefits, and more resources that we, as providers in Head Start programs, just don't have access to.

This impacts quality. Continuity of care is very important, and having those teachers who have the experience, who know the community, they know the families, who are well-versed in identifying challenges that the children may have, is even more critical now after COVID since we see that many of our children come into the program with very, very diverse experiences and very socially isolated. So, it's hard for them to interact with other children and other adults, when most of their lives they've seen adults wearing masks. They can't even see an adult smile when they

walk into the schools. So, it's important for us to keep in mind that all these -- that that change really has impacted the quality of the program as providers in Head Start programs have to continue to cut in different areas to support the staff; that we are able to keep the best as possible -- as long as possible.

We also have noticed that the budget really does not ensure parity. The intent of the court was to really bring to, and highlight, the importance of preschool education in children who are 3- and 4-year-olds, through certified teachers. Which is wonderful, and we want to encourage that, but we want to make sure that we're able to pay them equally as districts can. And, that can't happen if the budget is already starting off at a deficit. So, we go back to that budget formula that really needs to be looked at and ensure that DOE is funding 100% of the needs of the program so that we can, in turn, continue to provide that high quality.

Supporting a mixed-delivery system has always been part of what we do, and we want to continue to support that. But we want to make sure that districts (indiscernible), providers who are meeting all the requirements. Sometimes-- You heard from the data that a lot more districts are having in-district preschool classrooms now than maybe when Abbott provided -- you know, started. So, we want to make sure that that continues to be. I think having that level of connection with the community, giving parents the choice to continue to use those child-care centers or Head Start programs that they've used for their children before they became 3 years old, or even after, and before preschool expansion or Abbott comes into their communities, that they continue to work with those providers, because those are the people who know their children and know their family's needs and can support those needs well beyond just the education of their children.

So many things that I can talk about in terms of that financial hardship, but I want to make sure that the message is clear. We want to make sure that Abbott preschool, or preschool expansion, continues to support families in all of the communities. We want to make sure that school districts continue to collaborate with Head Start programs and child-care providers in their communities because -- it's not just because we provide more space and we're kind of like the holding pattern so the districts can make more classrooms accessible or build more buildings, but really to be part of that quilt that makes up a community.

Many of our staff -- not just at HOPES, but also other providers and Head Start programs -- come from the community. We're educated in the public school systems within those communities, and community colleges, and local colleges, and we want to make sure that we continue to support that and there are more avenues for teachers to continue to grow in that way. You know, we believe that it is time to strengthen our portion of this program, and to ensure that all of our young children experience high quality and equitable preschool education.

As had been said several times today, I just want to thank your commitment to this issue and advancing the quality of early childhood education throughout this state, and for allowing me to share my testimony today.

I hope that it helps give you a little glimpse into what the program looks like from the provider or Head Start program's point of view.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, that's -- you know, the information is really good.

And, I have a number of questions; I'm not going to ask them, but I will ask one.

And, that is, do you have -- or, do you feel you have a good relationship with or a good contact person at DOE and DOH to work with?

MS. ESTEVEZ-VARGAS: I think we have contacts. I think it's sometimes hard to get a timely response. I think it's -- you know, we do reach out. It takes several reach-outs, whether it's email and then a phone call and then another email to get a response.

But, I think there's also a lot of transitions that happen within those offices at the State level, and the intent is good. I want to be politically correct here -- I mean, I think the intention is -- they would be, well, I think it's just the action behind it. I think even from the Governor's Office at times we get a response; we have a meeting; we feel very positive; and, then, we have to do a lot more outreach and continue to be the squeaky wheel so that we get some attention.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: OK. I'm reading between the lines, I hear you.

Thank you.

MS. ESTEVEZ-VARGAS: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much for being here today, I appreciate it.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblywoman?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes?

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblywoman Reynolds-Jackson has a question.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: So, it's really not a question, it's more of a statement, and I think we're hearing this theme about investing in people.

And, then, I heard Ms. Vargas talk about the parity. And, when we're talking about investing in people -- you know, I went to a kid's count -- and, I'm not going to steal your thunder, Cynthia, but we talked about all of the great work that we have. But, we also have to look at the workers there.

And, I think this is where she's talking about the funding. They are so dramatically underpaid, and, so, while they provide this high-quality services so that families can work and know that their children are receiving this care, *they're* not being compensated, and *they* have to do double time. And, so, you know, you can't help but to say, "Where does that come in?" And, I think this is -- and, I've heard it from multiple people here, but we're going to keep on hearing it where we need a strategic plan to invest in that workforce, but also help to grow the workforce.

I know when I started out, I wanted to be in early-childhood education. And, I thought about all the things, the road to get there. And, I think there's alternative career paths besides college to get there. But, how do you grow that? And, I think that has to be a part of the conversation. How do we have those alternative career paths to get them there, to grow them from one career to the next career, that can take them up and beyond?

But, we have to have a cycle, because right now we are struggling in this workforce.

But, I wanted to thank you for elevating the parity piece in there.

MS. ESTEVEZ-VARGAS: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Very well put, Assemblywoman, thank you so much.

Next up we have Barbara DeMarco, representing Early Care & Education Consortium and the Early Childhood Education Advocates.

Barbara.

B A R B A R A D e M A R C O: Hi, and good afternoon, everyone, can you hear me?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes.

MS. DeMARCO: OK.

I'm with Porzio Government Affairs, and for over 25 years I have represented the licensed community-based child-care industry in New Jersey.

Today, I will be speaking on why universal pre-K should be provided in a public-private partnership between school districts in DCF-licensed community-based for-profit and not-for-profit child-care centers, and why we should not be creating more preschool classrooms within public schools when possible.

So, what do we know? We know that the child-care industry in New Jersey is in crisis, and that infant and toddler care is not available.

So, the first thing you need to understand is how child-care centers do their budgeting. A child-care center is able to exist and is able

to operate because they balance their infant and toddler care, and the high cost associated with that, with their 3- and 4-year-old classrooms. Essentially, you have one adult to every four infants; you have one adult to every six toddlers; and you have two adults to 15 to 20 kids in 3- and 4-year-old classrooms. So, the 3- and 4-year-old classrooms enable you to balance, or pay for, the infant and toddler care that you offer. Without 3- and 4-year-old classrooms, you can't offer infant and toddler care.

And, one of the biggest problems that we have found -- and, Karin Garver just spoke to this -- is that over time, of that 70,000 3- and 4-year-olds in these programs, most of them have been pulled out of licensed community-based child-care centers and placed in public school classrooms. These decisions are made almost entirely by school districts and their administrators, and they're done differently. Essentially, you could have 600 different models, one different for each school district; there is no uniformity. Some of these superintendents and school board members work beautifully with the child-care industry and they're willing to partner, while others want to bring all these classrooms into the public school structure, which is really unfortunate, because you have an existing infrastructure and it shouldn't be incumbent upon taxpayers to pay for additional infrastructure when one already exists.

In fact, last week I met with Lightbridge. Lightbridge is a high-quality child-care, DCF-licensed centers. They're headquartered in Woodbridge; they have 54 locations. And, I heard from franchisees who have tried to partner in UPK, and they tell me that, initially, the school district is willing to do it. But, as classrooms become available, they pull first the 4-year-old classrooms out of these centers -- and, these are all UPK-certified

classrooms -- and, then the 3-year-old classrooms. And, eventually they're left with just infant and toddlers. And, you cannot sustain yourself on infant and toddlers, because it would either be cost-prohibitive for the parents to pay for it because you don't have the 3- and 4-year-olds to balance, or be cost prohibitive for them to offer it. So, you really need those 3- and 4-year-old classrooms to allow you to provide the infant and toddler care that is needed.

The other thing that no one has spoken about is the differences in standards. Right now, the average public school is 60 years old. The environmental standards, and our lead problems in the State of New Jersey -- we have 11 of the worst cities in this state for lead contamination caused by pipes -- and, we have a plan that goes over 10 years to fix it. I began my career with the Arc of New Jersey. The first thing I learned was lead was the leading cause of intellectual disabilities, as well as behavioral and emotional disabilities. These are disabilities that are not irreversible. A child under the age of 7 absorbs lead at a rate of 10 times a child who is older. Children at that age, they are put on the ground; it's hand-to-mouth; it's mixage, drinking of the water; and it's a problem. And, we all know it is a problem in New Jersey.

So, what you guys did about 10 years ago was pass a law that says that child-care centers must be toxin-free. That is surfaces; that is air; that is water. You can't even have lead in the toilet water of a child-care center and allow them to be licensed. So, what does that tell me? It tells me that these children in 3- and 4-year-old classrooms -- UPK or otherwise -- in a child-care center -- or every child under 6 who is in a child-care center -- is in a safe environment that is free of toxins that cause intellectual delays, which, all this good work that UPK is doing is negated if those environmental

contaminants are allowed to stay there. So, it gives you even more of a reason why partnerships should occur between these school districts with these older infrastructures, but have quality child-care centers or centers that are willing to come up to quality because they are safe -- environmentally safe environments for these very, very young children. So, that's a very strong reason why you should be looking more and more at partnerships.

Another reason that I would tell you that partnership is important is because parents, working parents in the State of New Jersey, need two incomes when you have children to survive and live in this state. And, single mothers and/or fathers, they need to have a work day, a calendar year that is structured and mirrors their work day. A public school does not offer this, and the wraparound services before and after care are not high quality because DCF -- which licenses them -- cannot go into a school district, and even though they can cite them for violations, they cannot force them to fix them because it's not the DCF territory.

So, again, for the very young children, this is very problematic because their wrap programs are not the same quality, again, as a child-care center's programs when it comes to meeting those DCF standards. Which, in many ways -- especially as it relates to environment -- are much tougher than anything you would find in a public school. And, those environmental factors really do play into these intellectual development of a child.

So, for a lot of reasons, we believe that there is a package that goes out both in the Assembly and the Senate, and some of the sponsors are on this. Some require that there be a department for early childhood. This would create uniform standards, not just educationally, but on the

environmental end, and on the physical safety and the health safety of our youngest children.

We support mixed delivery. Why? So that those centers that do choose to partner, and a mandated mixed delivery where a certain number of seats are designated for the community, and that those contracts aren't just a year long but are two and three to enable some stability for the provider. And, also, some stability for the parents to know that infant and toddler care will be available.

When a child-care center enters into a willing agreement with a district, and that district starts pulling 3- and 4-year-olds after they've made all the modifications to comply with UPK from those centers, you are literally causing the slow death of that center. So, there has to be more stability, more uniformity in the way that we work with our child-care providers. That is just crucial to the survival.

Someone else will talk about teacher shortages. I mean, the child-care centers are facing the same shortages. Many of the people who worked in infant-toddler rooms were older women, and a lot of those women do not want to be exposed to children under age 6 because they carry disease and they're older and they do not want to be in those environments. So, what we have found is of the people who left the child-care industry, only two-thirds of those seats have been filled -- I'm sorry, those positions -- have been filled by either new staffers or people coming back.

And, finally, as a working woman, one of the things that COVID did was 1.8 million women dropped out of their jobs and became unemployed, either by choice or because of the situation presented. And, they named that the Number 1 reason women left their jobs was because

there was not child care available -- infant-toddler care first, and then 3- and 4-year-olds who meet the work day. And, that's significant. I say that as a divorced woman who raised a child -- I needed child care to work, and I know many women around this Zoom do as well. And, I think we need to understand that for women to work, to survive as a two-income family -- or even men who are single parents -- you need to have that full day, and you need quality not just in the education but in the care and in the environment.

And, for this reason, we think more needs to be done utilizing our private providers and allowing them to be the good partners we know they can be.

Thank you for your time.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, and I'm nodding my head, because I've been filling in those voids for my three kids who have needed child care through the pandemic, continued to need it, who struggle in the summers, vacations, to find quality, affordable care for their children.

And, I know if I'm experiencing it, I certainly know that many families are doing it. I often say, "We don't do a good job in this country of taking care of our little ones and our elders." Because I do both, and it's exhausting, and it's very hard.

And, you can hire people, but that's also extremely expensive. So, you have to work to be able to do that. It's something that I think, as a society, we have got to come to terms with. If we really want to have a healthy family life, if we want -- you know, we've got to take more responsibility to provide these things.

And, I think you make a great point about the centers. I'm very familiar with Lightbridge -- again, as a grandmother -- and, yes, it's a lot more expensive to take care of infants than it is 3- and 4-year-olds.

So, thank you very much for that testimony. I think it's very valuable.

We have three more people, and I'm going to say who they are so that you can perhaps tailor some of your testimony: Meghan Tavormina -- I apologize if I said that incorrectly -- New Jersey Association for the Education of Young Children; followed by Sharon Krengel from the Education Law Center, who will talk about preschool expansion and funding; and, we will end with Cynthia Rice, Senior Policy Analyst, Advocates for Children of New Jersey, in terms of potential next steps. I love that. We're depending on you, Cynthia, to give us some ideas about how we can really get on, you know -- take care of these issues.

All right, so, we'll start with Meghan.

MEGHAN TAVORMINA: Thank you.

Good afternoon, everybody, thank you for your interest in the early childhood industry in New Jersey, and for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Meghan Tavormina, and I am the current President of the New Jersey Association for the Education of Young Children, which is an early education professional organization with almost 2,000 members across the state. Our membership represents center-based, home-based, and school-based early learning in all geographic and socioeconomic areas of the state.

Today, I would like to introduce you to the nonpublic childcare system in New Jersey -- both our goals and our struggles. The goal of New Jersey's early education system is to provide high-quality education that is accessible to all children and affordable to all families. It is our goal to deliver a robust educational beginning that supports a high-quality entrance to the K-12 system. We hope to change the misconception, still held by a few, that we simply watch children until they are old enough to go to school. We work hard to remind these people that it is the early educational system that catches a significant amount of developmental delays, allowing for early intervention and supports, reducing the amount of special education needed.

We also work to remind people that the pandemic taught us that early education is the linchpin to society as a whole. High-quality child care fulfills two important goals: Keeping children safe while their parents work, and nurturing and developing children in ways that prepare them for school and beyond.

New Jersey child-care providers are committed to providing high-quality, accessible, *and* affordable child care to families, but there are some significant struggles slowing us down. In New Jersey, our child-care system is very complicated, and so are the problems. Here is an outline of the main issues we're facing. These issues are not new and are not due to the pandemic, and will *not* be rectified as the health emergency fades. These are systemic issues that have been fracturing our industry for decades.

First and foremost is the staffing crisis. I know that has been mentioned. You might say, "Join the club; the entire economy is struggling with staffing right now." But child care has *always* struggled with

finding and keeping teachers in classrooms. This issue affects all three of our goals: quality, access, and affordability. An inability to retain teachers leads to high turnover rates, affecting the quality of programming we can offer to young children. Ineffective recruitment tools leave classrooms closed, reducing the accessibility for families in New Jersey. And, without public funding, programs are forced to jump tuition rates, pushing child care outside of the affordability umbrella for most families. Because teacher stability is associated with a wide range of children's outcomes and parents' labor force participation, this staffing crisis has cascading consequences for children and families.

The primary reason why we are faced with such a dire staffing issue leads me into our second insurmountable hurdle -- and this also has been mentioned -- but the inadequate compensation. Our workforce -- our work simply does not align with our compensation. To put it into perspective, a preschool expansion teacher makes an average of \$32 an hour more than a center-based teacher for the exact same job. Without a public funding stream, our compensation comes directly from parent tuitions, leaving many schools with such slim margins that they're only able to offer minimum wage compensation for such challenging and important work. And, so, pre-pandemic, the child-care industry struggled to find and retain teachers. And, now, post-pandemic, where minimum wage is no longer even relevant, providers are forced to raise salaries and benefits beyond their revenue streams to try to compete with basic clerk and warehouse jobs.

What does this all mean? We continue to be at the bottom of the hiring pool, incapable of being able to stay competitive with, well, really anybody. Leaving classrooms empty.

I recently listened to a Board of Education meeting on teacher shortages, and one of their short-term solutions is to reduce the number of teachers and to reduce the type of benefits offered to solve what they said, “A bad math problem.” In early education, we’re not able to reduce teachers due to ratio regulations. And our benefits? They’re not there to take away or reduce. So, where is the money coming from? As I mentioned, it comes from parents. While we do have child-care assistance -- also known as our subsidy system that funds our lowest-income families -- most providers rely on parent tuition. Neither parent tuition nor subsidy rates cover the true cost of care, leaving only enough money in our budgets for minimum-wage salaries. The cost of care and education is not a new or different notion for those of you in the public school arena. What *is* different is that we are regulated to have much lower ratios than K-12, and that early education runs much longer than the public school, making our cost of care even higher than that of a kindergartener, with a fraction of the funding options.

As COVID relief dollars are coming to an end, providers are looking at the 2023-2024 tuition scales and coming to the horrible realization that they will need to put a significant increase on parents, simply to continue to stay competitive with Amazon. And, this will drive parents -- often women, and I’m sure many of them teachers -- straight out of the workforce. To complicate this issue further -- and, this also has been mentioned -- that the cost of infant-toddler care is three times as expensive to run due to regulatory ratios, leading many centers choosing to only offer preschool programs. Centers that *do* run programs for infants and toddlers rely on the tuitions of 3- and 4-year-olds to offset the lost revenue from serving infants and toddlers.

In expansion districts where mixed delivery is not being utilized, centers are more than just losing their 3- and 4-year-olds -- they likely will lose their infants and toddlers too, because you cannot financially sustain a program on infants and toddlers alone, and many will end up closing, creating more children and families with unmet needs than before expansion ever came in.

So, why does the public school system need to care about and understand child care? First, child care is the prerequisite to everyone else getting back to work. That includes teachers, bus drivers, custodians, administrators, school nurses, counselors, and more. Then, there's brain development -- follow the research. The brain development that takes place during the first five years is greater than any other point of a child's life. Children who attend quality early education have stronger executive functioning skills. High-quality child care results in a decrease of specialized education. Additionally, there is a reduction of adolescent issues like teen pregnancy and school dropout rates, that are shown to be lower for children who have high-quality early education opportunities. And, we heard that from the President of Jersey State University.

Currently, the public education system operates from when a child is 5 all the way through their college years. And, I say through college, because when you look at the relationship between high schools and colleges, you can see that both entities rely on one another; respect one another; are open-minded to one another; and are educated about each other's work. It is this type of relationship that we need to build on the other end of the developmental spectrum. Early education is an integral part of the

overall education system. We're all working towards the same goals -- we just need to make sure that we're working towards them together.

And, it was Assemblywoman Jasey who had said that the systems are still not synced, and I couldn't agree more. I am determined for New Jersey to find solutions that will build, fund, and implement a continuum of care for children starting at birth.

I thank you so much for making room for early education in this discussion, and I look forward to continuing to partner with you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you so much.

Wow, my head is spinning, and I'm sure others are as well.

I think what it comes down to is that we as a society need to put our money where our mouths are, and we need to recognize that families need support; young children need quality opportunities to develop; and, in the long run, we all benefit from that.

So, thank you very much for your testimony today.

We're going to hear next from Sharon Kregel, the Education Law Center. And, then, I'm going to ask my good friend Cynthia Rice to close us out.

So, Sharon.

S H A R O N K R E N G E L: Thank you, Assemblywoman Jasey and members of the Committee. Thanks for this opportunity for Education Law Center to be part of this important discussion.

I'm sure everyone knows that the Education Law Center is the legal counsel for the Abbott school children, and we have been advocates for and making the effort that we could in support of preschool for all these decades.

I know that you have my full testimony, and, so, I will try to be brief and I will basically talk about three issues that we think are crucial in the way that they impact the implementation of preschool -- and, that's both in the former Abbott districts and in the expansion districts. And, some of this has been brought up by other folks, I'll just add a little bit of color to that.

So, the first one is the Department of Education's capacity around this. So, we know that the creation of the Abbott preschool program over two decades ago was an enormous undertaking that required the leadership and coordination of the New Jersey Department of Education and the successful implementation of preschool through the unprecedented mixed delivery system that folks have been talking about all early afternoon that unifies public schools with private providers and Head Start classrooms. That was achieved with the engagement and the collaboration of the Department and the Abbott district leaders and early childhood providers. But, the NJDOE played a really crucial role in that, reviewing district program plans and budgets; providing technical assistance and grants; conducting data collection; offering expertise that enabled districts to work with community providers to meet the uniform standards of high quality that were accepted by the New Jersey Supreme Court. And, that of course included class size and teacher certification and also facilities and all the rest of it.

So, at the time, the DOE's Division of Early Childhood Education was well-staffed for this role. Right now, they're operating at a fraction of that capacity, even though they are implementing -- they are not only continuing the preschool program in the former Abbotts, but they are implementing preschool expansion. And, this limited capacity means that

the NJDOE is unable to provide the necessary assistance to expansion districts to develop a high-quality mixed-delivery preschool program that we have been hearing about.

And, we know that these districts urgently need this help. They need detailed information and data about their preschool-age population; identification of potential private providers and Head Start providers; needs assessments of those potential providers; and the improvements that are required to upgrade to Abbott high-quality standards. They need planning and budgeting support; they need access to qualified teachers and support staff; they need to talk about facilities needs and identify the issues there; and, a whole host of other issues that are essential for effective program implementation.

And, we also know at ELC that advocates are trying desperately to fill these gaps. But, speaking very bluntly, DOE no longer has the leadership, the staff, or the expertise to perform the functions that are at the center of successful preschool expansion.

So, that's one. The second is prioritizing expansion in high poverty districts. So, preschool expansion under the SFRA was created with the explicit goal of expanding the benefits of the high-quality program to all low-income students beyond the Abbott District borders. But, the implementation of expansion has actually *not* explicitly targeted the higher poverty districts. Instead, the DOE has responded to any district that applies without regard to district poverty or need. And, of course, we understand that some of this is because districts have applied that those -- they feel that they're ready to take on preschool as part of their program are the ones who have come forward. But, with the limited funding -- funding has increased

each year; we expect that to happen again this year -- and that has been terrific, but it has been limited. It's important that we prioritize expansion to those students in districts that would benefit them most.

So, the DOE must identify high-poverty districts that have not implemented preschool expansion and work with district leadership and community providers to prepare the ground for expansion there. And, the DOE also has to address impediments to implementation in those districts, including adequate classroom space, by developing a system of course supports, research, guidance, to enable districts to proactively address any obstacles that they may have, and to work with community providers and so that we can get preschool to -- you know, this high-quality preschool program -- to the students that need it the most.

And, the third and last issue -- this is obviously not the last issue in the sense that there are no other issues, but that I will talk about -- is reassessing Abbott preschool standards and funding. So, we know that the fiscal landscape for preschool education has changed dramatically, because it has been over two decades, and the cost components of high-quality preschool that informed the initial establishment of the cost parameters in the SFRA were based on data from actual budgets of in-district and private providers in Head Start classrooms in the former Abbott Districts, but from -- but dating all the way back to the mid-2000s. And, the cost and funding levels of preschool education aid have not been reviewed, evaluated, or assessed to ensure their adequacy since they were initially developed over 15 years ago.

Districts and providers alike, also here today, have reported that the funding structure for preschool education aid in the formula

no longer reflects the current reality of what it takes to staff, to operate, and to manage a high-quality preschool classroom. In the former Abbott Districts, preschool teachers have gained experience over the years, and, as a result, have increased salaries -- in salaries and benefits. Providers, who must provide comparable pay and benefits to their teachers, have been unable to keep pace, and we have heard that.

There's also the teacher shortage, and the fact that districts and providers now must spend more to recruit and retain a qualified preschool teacher workforce. Other trends also implicate teacher retention and recruitment, and impact fixed cost. Again, we've heard a lot of this. And, those include facilities and maintenance; healthcare and benefits; materials and supplies; other key resources; the COVID-19 pandemic and what it has done to education and to the teacher workforce; and, it's made it difficult for many existing providers to continue to deliver their education program at the same level of quality.

And, these fiscal concerns likely factor into the decisions of high need districts, perhaps, and, you know, in some cases, not to commit to preschool expansion. And the same as we, again -- as we have heard for providers not to become parts of those programs.

So, what we need is a thorough evaluation of the cost and aid amounts for preschool. The Murphy administration must utilize the next educational adequacy report, which is due by February 2025 so that it can be a part of the FY26 State budget. And, they need to do the educational adequacy report, of course, as in law; it's in the SFRA, it's required every three years. And, the administration needs to conduct an in-depth evaluation of the cost of delivering the Abbott quality standards in district, community

provider, and Head Start settings. And, sufficient and up-to-date analysis of costs of operating a preschool program will ensure -- we hope -- that New Jersey's preschoolers are getting the high-quality program they deserve and will encourage expansion, which is very important.

So, again, thank you so much for this opportunity to discuss these problems. We look forward to assisting the Legislature in ensuring that the high-quality program continues at the level -- at that level. Because these are New Jersey's youngest public school students, and we need to get them started well.

And, I'm happy to answer any questions.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Oh, wow.

Thank you so much, Sharon.

I'm making notes, and I may get in contact with a couple of you in terms of guidance, specifically about what next steps are. I mean, there's definitely a theme here.

But, I want to be respectful of everyone's time, so, I am going to ask Cynthia Rice if you would do us the honor of wrapping up.

And, I want to thank you for suggesting that the Joint Committee examine this critically important issue, OK. I don't think it was on our radar, but it certainly is now.

Thank you.

Cynthia.

CYNTHIA RICE, ESQ., J. D.: Thank you, Assemblywoman Jasey, and members of the Joint Committee.

Advocates for Children of New Jersey really appreciate this opportunity to testify today on, really, the challenges and opportunities facing our state's system of early care and education.

So, we've heard so much today, and whether we're talking about one or both of the components that make up our overall system -- preschool, state-funded preschool, or child care -- the testimony really was clear, how essential they are in laying that strong educational and social-emotional foundation for young children. How this system allows for parents to go to work, knowing that while they're working, making a living, their young children are being cared for and well educated, *and* in supporting a stronger economy as a result of parents actually being able to go to work.

But, what was also clear is that this system is not functioning in a way that is effectively supporting those three goals. And that, as we've heard, is affecting equitable program access, affordability for families, and, in the case of childcare, the questionable future of these small businesses, which are primarily owned by women. They remain at risk. And, all of this is happening during a staffing crisis in the public schools and in child care, at a time when at least one institution of higher education has announced the gutting of its early-childhood teacher program, which will further reduce the number of qualified teachers in the future.

Now, I have to say that the various State departments overseeing the -- the many State departments overseeing the State-funded preschool and child care -- have taken positive steps, particularly during COVID, to address some of these issues. But, the problems facing this system, however, as Meghan Tavormina said, existed long before March of 2020, and the steps taken -- while important -- were driven by the pandemic

emergency, and not from a systems perspective to fix what has been broken for far too long.

So, where do we begin? I think in listening today, I've seen four areas that need to be addressed. First, adequate funding to support equitable program access and affordability; strengthening the mixed-delivery preschool model so that the maximum number of 3- and 4-year-olds can actually benefit from high-quality preschool; developing and implementing new policies that would better support the overall system; and develop clear and concise guidelines and regulations across the departments with adequate oversight to ensure program fidelity.

We would have had to have brought our pajamas to cover all that I had in my written testimony, so I want to look at one of those issues -- and I urge you to look at all of ACNJ's testimony -- and, that is the adequate funding. And, I want to say that in preparing today, I thought, "How is that going to be heard? Talking about the need for money." And, I just want to assure every member of the Legislature that, while we're having this conversation, advocates in New Jersey -- and, I will talk about my organization -- are having regular conversations with our New Jersey Congressional Delegation, recognizing that systems issue is not only hard, it costs money, and that no state can do it on their own without Federal support.

But, here's the thing -- this has got to be a team effort between both Federal dollars and State dollars to begin to bring about the reform that we've heard today is so important.

So, let's talk about, so, where is funding needed? Most important, it's the staffing crisis. Regardless of auspice, early childhood

classrooms need teachers. And, while school districts are struggling to find staff -- particularly early childhood staff -- the problem is dire in the child-care community, because they're generally unable to provide a level of compensation that allows them to compete with other available jobs -- including those in State funded -- in the preschool expansion districts.

And, Meghan talked about -- so, how is child care paid for? Certainly private pay; it's also paid for for child-care assistance. But, the increase in tuition is not tenable, because families can't afford it. Now, right now in New Jersey we have several bills that begin to address the issue: The Subsidy Enrollment Bill would continue to provide one stable source of funding. That is -- this is the Child Care Assistance Program, our subsidy program, which has been, since March of 2020, providers are being paid what's called "at enrollment," and not attendance. And, that's a reliable source of funding.

But, that money is going to run out, because it's Federal dollars. We have talked to hundreds and hundreds of providers who have all agreed that if we go back to the way in which the funding happened before, by attendance, it will be catastrophic to programs. Why? Because a portion of that money is helping to pay for staff. And, so, going back is a huge step in the wrong direction. We also have the child-care income tax -- the child-care income tax credit -- which would provide funding right into the pockets of child-care staff, recognizing that they need additional funding, and, an increased amount of tax credit for those who are in infant-toddler classrooms, recognizing that that hardest age level to care for and educate is also the most expensive. And, those two bills are before both Senate and Assembly Budget Committee.

New Jersey can also implement additional policy and laws that are thinking outside of the box. For example, in Kentucky, as a new law that expands child-care assistance eligibility to include child-care workers -- all child-care workers. So, what does that mean? So, think about it as if a person takes a lower paying job, but they have really good health insurance, right -- how many people have made that decision? I'll take less than my salary if I know I'm going to have better health insurance. It's the same idea. I'll stay in a job where I'm not making as much as I'd like to, but my own children are being cared for. And, in Kentucky, that doesn't only include young children, it includes school-aged children. So, how do we think differently about recognizing this dire need? That's one example.

ACNJ has been having listening sessions over the last few weeks and talking to child-care providers. And, over and over, they said, "You know, that retention grant -- that retention bonus that was provided -- granted, using Federal dollars -- made a difference in keeping people on and keeping them staying in the classrooms." Again, looking at -- could that work? Can we look at state dollars to say, "If you work six months you get X amount of money added on?" We *have* to think differently. So, that's -- how do we begin to address the teacher crisis?

The next thing is funding to ensure equity in the former Abbott preschool districts. Since 1999, most of those former Abbott districts had implemented State funding through this mixed-delivery system. The current preschool funding structure, as we heard Joselyn Estevez-Vargas talk about, has led to varying and inequitable levels of quality for those young children with whom New Jersey, the New Jersey Supreme Court in the Abbott decisions, hoped would benefit. And, as a result, they have fewer dollars

available, and the programs have experienced chronic, longstanding structural deficits in their budgets, which affects the ability to attract and retain staff -- again, all things come back to staffing -- and pay for the higher cost of quality.

You know, we call these districts now former Abbott districts, but make no mistake about it, the protections that come from those Supreme Court decisions are still in place, including directing the Commissioner of Education to ensure that preschool programs are adequately funded and that they receive assistance in meeting program needs. Which was part of the Abbott VI decision in 2000.

And, the last one I want to mention is to funding to ensure an adequate supply of qualified teachers. Research has shown that one of the most important elements of a high-quality early-childhood education program is a well-prepared teacher. But, in the midst of an early-childhood staffing crisis, increased funding is needed to secure the financial viability of at least one university as we heard earlier in New Jersey City University, and provide the types of incentives necessary to support individuals in entering and remaining in the field. There's been a lot of talk about what happened in New Jersey City University. Putting all the politics aside, we need those student teachers to finish so they can get into preschool classrooms. It's as clear as that.

And, so, the State -- we urge the State to say, "What do we have to do to make that happen?" Because, those students who will have a P3 certificate -- which is a very specific, it's the only certification in our state that would allow teachers to work in preschool classrooms; they have to have that. And, so, cutting that off, New Jersey City University -- a feeder to so

many programs, particularly in Hudson and Essex County -- is at the detriment to the children in those districts.

So, I want to talk about under that, but that's just one component. In New Jersey, we already know how to get teachers to be what we call "well prepared and highly qualified." We did that in the Abbott case. Between 2000 and 2004, our state set up a system that met teachers where they are, for them to go back to school and successfully complete it. That system does not exist -- both the funding and the infrastructure. But, that doesn't mean it can't happen again. So, recognizing that everyone doesn't -- that our State-funded preschool requires a bachelor's degree; not all of our programs for example, infants and toddlers under licensing, there's not -- it doesn't require a bachelor's degree, but what will it take to get better educated, better, well-trained teachers -- at all levels -- looking at that whole birth-5 system as a continuum? What will it take? And, we know that it takes more than the money, it takes having that system to support teachers.

In closing, you know, I just want to say that support for an early-childhood system can only be sustained when the programs within that system are viewed by the Governor, by the Legislature, and the broader public as the public good that it is. Its success is inextricably linked with attaining those three initial goals of supporting a growing economy; supporting working families; and, of course, supporting young children's educational and emotional growth and development.

During the pandemic, we saw firsthand how essential the system was, and, as we moved beyond COVID, its essentialness remains. Developing both short- and long-term policy legislative strategies to address

many of the issues identified is the only way to move towards adequately supporting this public good.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Cynthia.

You are ending on a very sobering note, but, I am a firm believer that for every problem there's a solution if we have the will to do it.

And, I think this hearing was a good step towards building that kind of support. So, we'll be getting back to you, I'm sure.

But, for my colleagues who are still on, I want to thank you for still being here. I know it's a long meeting, but if there are any questions or comments that anyone would like to make, we have a few minutes, I'd certainly like to hear them, and we will follow up in terms of next steps. (no response)

All right, seeing none, I want to thank everyone for your attention, and I want to thank Becky -- I want to especially thank you for setting this up. I know it's not easy to put everything together like this.

And, I look forward to seeing you in person, soon, I hope.

It's been -- I think COVID has hit all of us hard, but somehow we'll survive this. Hopefully we'll learn something from it and we'll improve our approach, especially to supporting young children and their families, because they are indeed our future. And, if we don't support them, we will pay for it in the future.

So, I don't want to leave on a negative note. I appreciate the information; I know my colleagues do as well. And, we look forward to working with all of you to make the changes that are necessary and have those conversations.

Thank you so much.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Thank you.

Be well, be safe, and--

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: --keep moving.

Thank you.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Take care; bye bye.

(MEETING CONCLUDED)