

# A Strong Start:

Investing in the Sustainability of Early Childhood Special Education



## Summary

In New York City, approximately 13,000 children ages 3-5 rely on 4410 special education preschools<sup>1</sup> like Kennedy Children's Center (KCC) to provide them with mandated education and therapy services. However, due to years of flat state funding and a lack of qualified teacher assistant and teacher candidates, the future of early childhood special education in NYC is at risk. Our students, teachers, and families all urgently need new programmatic and fiscal solutions to ensure the long-term sustainability of KCC and other 4410 schools citywide.

**This policy brief offers recommendations for how KCC and our partners in government can work together to invest in the students and teachers who are at the heart of our mission.**

## A Looming Crises

Kennedy Children's Center (KCC) proudly serves 100% public school children who will attend New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) Kindergarten programs when they turn five years old.

While our program staffing patterns are determined by the New York State Education Department (NYSED), state funding only covers 94% of our allowable costs. Over the past eight years, 4410 preschools have received only two increases of 2% - approximately half the increase that school-aged special education providers received. Through a funding model that is, in NYSED's own words, "complicated, unpredictable, and does not reimburse total program expenses,"<sup>2</sup> KCC is at risk of not having adequate resources to staff our schools and meet each student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) as directed by federal and state law.

KCC is attempting to recruit teaching staff at a time when there is a well-documented, national shortage of teachers and teacher assistants. Enrollment in teacher preparation programs has fallen 35 percent nationwide in the last five years,<sup>4</sup> and KCC competes directly with the NYCDOE for the same shrinking pool of candidates.

While NYCDOE teachers work a 10 month school year, our employees work for 12 months due to the significant developmental delays exhibited by our students. Our hard-working teachers are paid 30% less, on average, than their colleagues at public schools, although their responsibilities and compliance with NYCDOE regulations is equal. **As a result, providers such as KCC lose approximately 30% of our teaching staff annually<sup>1</sup>.**

As we continue to struggle with inadequate funding, we are facing a growing demand for our services. **31 special education preschools closed in NYC in the last 3.5 years because they could no longer afford to operate, leaving hundreds of children in need of new placements<sup>3</sup>.** Providers like KCC are fully enrolled or have growing waitlists. As of August 2018, NYSED is still seeking 744 seats for the 2018-2019 school year.

## A Lasting Impact on Our Students

Early childhood special education provides a documented, well-established benefit to children at a pivotal time in their development, establishing a lifelong foundation for learning and socialization. Thousands of parents, as well as the New York City Department of Education, rely on 4410 providers like KCC to prepare their children for Kindergarten by building communication, problem-solving, and cooperation skills<sup>5</sup>.

However, the current 4410 funding model, and resulting high staff turnover, greatly strain our ability to continue providing the high-quality early childhood special education that our students deserve. **NYSED is aware of the fiscal problems faced by providers, as well as the long-term implications as we struggle to retain qualified staff, provide competitive salaries and benefits, and maintain aging infrastructure.**

## Doing More with Less

In response to these realities, we have adapted our own school model to include the **Grow Your Own Workforce Development Program** and **Model Training Program**, which build the capacity of our staff by restructuring supervisory duties and utilizing experienced teaching staff as mentors.

- **Grow Your Own (GYO) Workforce Development Program:** Our 6-to 8-week training program, established with seed funding from the Robin Hood Foundation, provides a combination of in-classroom training and professional development that leads to certification as a NYSED Teacher Assistant. Candidates come from the communities we serve, which allows for a diverse workforce that is reflective of the children and families we serve. GYO graduates are well-prepared for employment in 4410 programs like KCC.
- **Model Training Program:** The teacher shortage has led to increasing numbers of uncertified teachers leading 4410 classrooms. By arranging our classrooms into units, each led by an experienced Master Teacher, we can provide the additional supervision and mentorship our uncertified teachers need to succeed. This model also helps to retain the experienced teachers who are integral to our workforce by providing stipends to compensate highly qualified staff for mentoring less experienced teachers.



*Grow Your Own program graduates*

**While these two programs further our organizational commitment as a learning community, they require adequate funding from NYSED in order to continue and grow.**

## Sustainable Solutions

Please join us in advocating to the New York State Board of Regents and the Division of Budget, who have the power to update the outdated tuition methodology and provide a funding increase for 4410 providers statewide. **Our reimbursement rate should equal what NYSED has determined are necessary and reasonable costs for the education of children with special needs.**

It is imperative that our elected officials work to correct the rate methodology and increase funding for 4410 special education preschools throughout New York State. This will ensure that providers like KCC can provide early childhood special education to every eligible child in NYC, while investing in our hardworking teachers and the future of our community.

### *References and Further Reading:*

<sup>1</sup>Daily News: 'EXCLUSIVE: City preschools shut out hundreds of kids with severe disabilities' <https://nydn.us/2MHM7Xy>

<sup>2</sup>NYSED Regents: 'New Funding Methodology for Preschool Inclusion Recommendations for Consideration Pursuant to Chapter 59 of the laws of 2017' <https://bit.ly/2OBwn5G>

<sup>3</sup>NYN Media: 'Salary disparities are hurting special education students too' <https://bit.ly/2PcKY8O>

<sup>4</sup>'The Teacher Shortage Crisis is Here,' a 2016 article in U.S. News and World Report

<sup>5</sup>Zero to Three <https://www.zerotothree.org/>