



Senator Brisport and members of the committee on children and families, thank you for giving us the opportunity to share with you all why universal child care must be in the forefront of our agenda to make New York work for ALL New Yorkers. My name is Marina Marcou-O'Malley, I am the policy and operations director for the Alliance for Quality Education.

Universal Child Care is not a pipe dream. It's a necessity that will help families and children while at the same time boosting our economy. I come before you as a mom of two children who went through the child care system, and as an advocate who is fighting to make child care free and accessible to everyone. The Alliance for Quality Education is a coalition of community organizing groups from across the state, organizing parents on child care, pre-K, school funding and school climate. AQE is a proud member of the Empire State Campaign on Child Care and fully endorses the budget priorities the campaign has put forward.

First, let me be clear: Universal Child care is the solution to the child care crisis. Universal child care means that teachers and providers in child care programs make enough to thrive; that parents are able to choose the type of program they want their child to participate in without spending a fortune on tuition or without having to put their entire life circumstances on display to qualify for assistance. It means that families keep their dignity and their children experience the nurture and learning that early education provides. Universal child care enables moms to return to work, it enables women, and in particular women of color to work and flourish. And, it enables children to start pre-K or kindergarten already knowing how to socialize with their peers, how to behave in a more structured learning environment, and often are reading and writing because they are ready to and were allowed to thrive at their own pace. That's what the child care system does. That's what the women, and yes, it is primarily women, who work in the field nurture children toward. This has been the experience of many working moms, including my own.

My kids started attending a child care program, right here on the plaza, when they were 12 weeks old. They learned how to be with other kids, how to interact with their environment, how to hold a crayon, how to read books without words, how to do science experiments and how to ask questions to satisfy their curiosity. They were ready to start school and they are thriving.

But, even as wonderful as the program was, it was unacceptable that my husband and I paid more for our child care program than we did for our mortgage. It was unacceptable that the teachers in the program made so little that they had to access public assistance programs for their own families. One of the teachers who was working at the program for 35 years, made \$35,000 a year, right before her retirement. That is criminal, and that is the reality of most of the child care workforce. And, that was not the fault of the program, but of our system that has been severely underfunded for decades. When a program depends on private pay families to make ends meet because the assistance rates are too low and because there is no additional state funding to the workforce, teachers are forced to make too little, which often pushes them to find different employment, destabilizing the program and affecting the children in it.

It is for reasons like those mentioned above that we are here today to urge you as members of the committee on children and families and the entire legislature to commit to universal child care. We are cognizant that universal child care does not happen overnight, or even in a single year, which is why we want each year to bring us closer to that goal. The Empire State Campaign on Child Care has laid out budget and policy priorities that will bring the state to the end goal of universal child care. Specifically, this year, the campaign and all of us in it, are committed to fighting for \$3 billion to invest in the workforce in the form of a short-term workforce compensation fund that will provide an additional \$12,500 pay to all teachers and providers; ensuring that they have access to affordable health and retirement benefits, and, set a plan to have a methodology to pay the workforce thriving wages by 2025. In addition, because families need access to care outside the nine-to-five, the state must make sure that it provides supplemental funding for those providers running or establishing new programs to operate these hours. During the child care tour that Senator Brisport did in the fall of 2021, non-traditional hours, benefits and pay were among the top issues that providers and teachers raised at every stop of the tour.

One of the other issues we have heard during the tour, and continues to be raised, is that of how difficult it is to access child care assistance. Even the governor recognized that it is so difficult to access assistance, that only 10% of families who are eligible make use of the benefit. That is if you are a citizen or if your child is a citizen. If the child is undocumented, the family is not eligible for assistance, a fact that perpetuates this cycle of xenophobia we are in, and the continuous conflict between “us” and “them.” Universal child care means care for ALL, not just some children. Immigrant parents need access to child care to continue to work and support our New York economy.

Access to child care assistance is also difficult for working families without any immigration complications. Depending on which county families reside, the process can be easy to navigate or more often cumbersome and dehumanizing. Families have to provide proof that they are working, proof that they do not make enough, etc to prove that they are in need of assistance. Oftentimes, the most difficult task is to actually locate the application for assistance and decipher to whom it needs to go. This process sends many families away, shutting them out of child care. So, because child care is so unaffordable, children are left out, parents cannot work which in turn sentences them to struggling to make ends meet.

The parents we work with have told us time and time again that IF they find a program, and that is a big IF, they have to make choices about what to do. Do they pay the [\\$250-350 per week](#) for toddlers (depending which county they live in) or do they pay their rent or mortgage? These are choices that families have to make because child care is not affordable, nor is assistance easy to access. Families who have gone through some of the eligibility process for other assistance programs have to do it again for child care assistance. A common sense approach to this should be to be categorically eligible, if you are enrolled in one program (such as SNAP, or WIC, or Medicaid), you automatically qualify for child care assistance.

And, yet, the child care workforce is grossly underpaid. Ninety seven percent of jobs pay higher than child care. This alone answers the question why there are not enough people willing to become early educators or program providers. Why would anyone choose to live in poverty and be themselves on public assistance when they can get a job that does not involve caring for other humans, much less little people, and get paid more. People, women, mostly women of color do it. They do it because they care about children. Our state needs to step up and invest in the workforce. When people make more money, they invest/spend more money in their communities. That's why we are leading this year with the investment in the workforce. Because paying teachers more, means keeping them in the profession; means keeping programs open. It means that families have options of where to look for child care.

As the state increases the income of families who can be eligible for child care assistance, correctly so, it absolutely MUST invest in the workforce or it becomes a false promise to families, one made only for optics. The state must sufficiently invest in the child care workforce, so that more families can access assistance. Right now, with eligibility at just shy of \$84,000 for a family of four, it is incredibly difficult to find a program because so many have closed.¹

And, as I turn to my fellow parents here, to tell their story I will leave you with this: caregiving is education. And as education, it must be a public good. As a public good, it needs to be free and open to everyone. Universal child care for ALL is the goal. It is achievable and necessary. But only if we want to make our state flourish and get a high return on investment. Only if we prioritize children and invest in them. And only, if prioritize women, in particular women of color and invest in them.

¹ https://www.nysenate.gov/sites/default/files/alliance_for_quality_education_ed_testimony_7839.pdf