



616 H Street, NW · Suite 300
Washington, DC 20001
T 202.467.4900 · F 202.467.4949
www.childrenslawcenter.org

Testimony before the District of Columbia Council

Committee on Education

December 11, 2013

The State of Pre-Kindergarten Education in the District of
Columbia

Good morning, Chairman Catania and members of the Committee on Education. I am Judith Sandalow, Executive Director of Children's Law Center (CLC),¹ the largest non-profit legal services organization in the District of Columbia and the only such organization devoted to a full spectrum of children's legal services. Every year, CLC serves more than 2,000 low-income children and families; a majority of these children receive their education in the District's public schools.

Ensuring that all our children receiving a high-quality early childhood education is one of the smartest investments the District can make in our children and in our city's future. Early education provides the foundation for all future learning. The District should be proud of our position as a leader in providing universal Pre-Kindergarten. DC is first in the nation in terms of the percentage of children enrolled at age 3 and 4 and also has a higher expenditure per child than any of the states.² The Office of the State Superintendent for Education reports that 86% of all three and four year olds in DC are enrolled in publicly funded Pre-K programs³ -- through the District of Columbia Public Schools, community-based organizations and charter schools -- and that there is more than enough capacity to provide a slot to every child who needs a program to attend.⁴

Why Early Education Matters

Emerging science on brain development reinforces what many parents, educators and policymakers have already known for decades: it makes sense to invest

in our youngest children and give them a strong start in life. The early year of a child's life, when his or her brain is forming, provides a critical window of opportunity: during these brief years caregivers and teachers have great influence to shape a child's future potential in terms of social, emotional and academic skills.⁵ According to leading scientists "early experiences determine whether a child's brain architecture will provide a strong or weak foundation for all future learning, behavior and health."⁶ During these years children are also learning socio-emotional skills such as self-regulation which is a key to later academic success.⁷

Young children are impacted, positively or negatively, by their home, community and school environment. Children who live in low-income households are more likely to face traumatic stress which can seriously affect their development. Forty-two percent of young children in the District live in low-income families.⁸ These young children, even more than their wealthier peers, need high-quality early childhood experiences. Research comparing the skills of preschool children from different socioeconomic backgrounds finds large difference in language and cognitive skills at school entry, age three and perhaps even as early as age one.⁹ When children are living in poverty they are more likely to experience a variety of stressful experiences – ranging from witnessing violence, to having a parent who is unable to attend to their needs, to being homeless -- which impact their physical and mental health.¹⁰ But

enriching early environments, such as Pre-Kindergarten classrooms, can mitigate the effect of this stress on a child's developing brain and body.

The Need for High-Quality Programs

It is important, of course, that these Pre-Kindergarten programs be high-quality. There are substantial positive effects when children attend high-quality early education programs; these effects are cognitive and non-cognitive¹¹ and include higher tests scores, fewer behavior problems and lower rates of grade retention.¹²

Currently, there is no standardized way of comparing the quality of publicly-funded early childhood education programs in the District. Different programs (community-based, Head Start, DCPS, charters) all meet varying standards.¹³ We look forward to getting more information on the quality of the District's programs through the Kindergarten Entry Assessment pilot which is being launched this school year as well as the Quality Rating Improving System which begins this spring. Both of these are tools which assess the level of school readiness in kindergarten children and will provide an additional measure of accountability for programs within the Pre-Kindergarten system.¹⁴

A Wise Investment

Intervening early in a child's life by providing high-quality early education, rather than trying to catch a child up or remediate problems later in life, is also cost-effective. The best interventions begin at the earliest stages, as one expert notes, "Skills

begets skills; motivation begets motivation...the longer society waits to intervene in the life cycle of a disadvantaged child, the more costly it is to remediate disadvantage.”¹⁵

On average, every dollar spent on Pre-Kindergarten returns \$7 in later cost-savings and benefits.¹⁶ The District has wisely recognized this and I hope our investment in Pre-Kindergarten will continue and also spread to other areas of preventive and early intervention services. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering your questions.

¹ Children’s Law Center works to give every child in the District of Columbia a solid foundation of family, health and education. We are the largest provider of free legal services in the District and the only to focus on children. Our 80-person staff partners with local pro bono attorneys to serve more than 2,000 at-risk children each year. We use this expertise to advocate for changes in the District’s laws, policies and programs. Learn more at www.childrenslawcenter.org.

² The National Institute for Early Education Research, *The State of Preschool 2012*, 150 (2012).

³ Office of State Superintendent of Education, 2013 Annual Report Pre-Kindergarten Enhancement and Expansion Amendment Act of 2008, 3 (September 30, 2013).

⁴ Office of State Superintendent of Education, 2013 Annual Report Pre-Kindergarten Enhancement and Expansion Amendment Act of 2008, 3 (September 30, 2013). The District has sufficient capacity to educate the 15,314 three and four year olds in the District with a capacity of 17,130 Pre-K slots in DCPS, public charter schools and community-based organizations.

⁵ National Forum on Early Childhood Program Evaluation, Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, *A Science-Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy: Using Evidence to Improve Outcomes in Learning, Behavior, and Health for Vulnerable Children* (August 2007).

⁶ National Forum on Early Childhood Program Evaluation, Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, *A Science-Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy: Using Evidence to Improve Outcomes in Learning, Behavior, and Health for Vulnerable Children, Summary of Essential Findings*, 1 (August 2007).

⁷ Greg J. Duncan, Jens Ludwig et al, *Reducing Poverty through Preschool Interventions*, *The Future of Children*, V. 17, No. 2, 144 (Fall 2007).

⁸ Annie E. Casey Foundation. *The First Eight Years: Giving Kids a Foundation for Lifetime Success*, 4.

⁹ Greg J. Duncan, Jens Ludwig et al, *Reducing Poverty through Preschool Interventions*, *The Future of Children*, V. 17, No. 2, 144 (Fall 2007).

¹⁰ Edwards VJ, et al. The wide-ranging health consequences of adverse childhood experiences. In Kathleen Kendall-Tackett and Sarah Giacomoni (eds.) *Victimization of Children and Youth: Patterns of Abuse, Response Strategies*, Kingston, NJ: Civic Research Institute; 2005.

¹¹ James J. Heckman, PhD, *The Case for Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children*, *Big Ideas for Children: Investing in Our Nation’s Future*, 51 (2008). Longitudinal studies from the Perry Preschool Program and the Abecedarian Program (both of which used random assignment design and collected long-term follow-up data) demonstrate substantial positive effect of early environmental enrichment on schooling

achievement, job performance and social behaviors long after the interventions had ended. Data from Olds' Nurse Family Partnership Program, Head Start and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers also confirmed these findings.

¹² Annie E. Casey Foundation. *The First Eight Years: Giving Kids a Foundation for Lifetime Success*, 8.

¹³ Raise DC Partnership, *Raise DC Baseline Report Card*, 21 (Feb. 2013).

¹⁴ Office of State Superintendent of Education, 2013 Annual Report Pre-Kindergarten Enhancement and Expansion Amendment Act of 2008, 6 (September 30, 2013).

¹⁵ James J. Heckman, PhD, *The Case for Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children*, Big Ideas for Children: Investing in Our Nation's Future, 50 (2008).

¹⁶ Kevin Lindsey, First Focus, *Pre-K for Every Child: A Matter of Fairness*, (July 2013).