

COMMUNITY-LEVEL CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING A MIXED DELIVERY PREKINDERGARTEN SYSTEM:

A Brief Review of Research and Field Experience



School Community Partnerships Project Policy Brief I



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This work was supported by a grant from the Booth Ferris Foundation to CCI. In this project, CCI is working actively with policymakers and early childhood and public school educators in communities across the state to learn more about innovations that can be replicated, best practices in school-community partnerships, and policy areas that need more attention in implementing a mixed delivery pre-kindergarten system.

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Samuel A. Stephens, Ph.D.

Over the past decade, states have dramatically expanded prekindergarten services (Pre-K), given the evidence that high-quality early childhood education can put children on a path to success in school and later life. To support the expansion, most of those states have adopted a mixed delivery system, developing the new educational opportunities in both public schools and early childhood programs in the community, a strategy that leverages the existing capacity, expertise and public investments that support early learning and healthy development. Such a system has the potential to more rapidly expand the availability of high quality early education and also offers families a choice of preschool settings.

Offering prekindergarten in early childhood centers can also offer many other advantages. Many community programs offer full-day full-year services, providing extended learning time for children before and after school, in the summer and during holidays when public schools are traditionally closed. Many also serve children from infancy through preschool, offering continuity for young children and their families - a factor which research shows can enhance children's success in school. Teachers working in community-based early childhood settings also bring a wealth of experience in working with young children using developmentally-appropriate practice and child-led learning, which are associated with better educational outcomes. Head Start programs, a frequent partner in state Pre-K programs, also offer effective family involvement and family support models, transportation and social services and many have established connections with other agencies that can provide a range of health, mental health, and family services.

Strong collaborative partnerships between public schools and community programs offer the opportunity to go well beyond expanding the availability of services. Increasingly, educators and policymakers are looking at strategies to align learning experiences, enrich services and family supports and build a unified early education system so that all children benefit equally regardless of setting.

Public schools operate in the context of public education systems, which have the infrastructure and staff capacity to administer a community-wide program as well as the resources to hire and support certified teachers and implement research-based practice and curricula. The model established in most state Pre-K programs builds on the strengths of early childhood programs in the community and adds early childhood education to public schools. Strong collaborative partnerships between public schools and community programs offer the opportunity to go well beyond expanding the availability of services. Increasingly, educators and policymakers are looking at strategies to align learning experiences, enrich services and family supports and build a unified early education system so that all children benefit equally regardless of setting.



Great progress has been made on this front, but developing and implementing an integrated, coordinated state Pre-K system is challenging. The two worlds of public education and early childhood development are still far from aligned, operating with complex governance and funding sources, in addition to different strategies and approaches to practice. With interest growing in Pre-K and in strategies for practice and service delivery, this paper reviews some of the key factors to consider in establishing strong school-community partnerships at the state level, drawing particularly on the experience in New York and New Jersey. Experience in both these states testifies to the level of attention, effort, and systematic support needed to successfully implement state-funded prekindergarten using a mixed delivery system. A key lesson from New Jersey's implementation of the court-mandated preschool program for 3- and 4-year olds in over 30 districts across the state was the importance of building local district capacity to recruit, contract with, oversee, and support quality in community-based early education organizations.¹ The same has been true in New York.²

In New York State, the original Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) program mandated that public school districts, with some exceptions, contract for a minimum of ten percent of enrollment in community-based child care programs that meet state standards. Current enrollment in early childhood programs based in the community has consistently exceeded that mandate. Today, 60 percent of the 100,000 four-year-olds enrolled in New York State's Pre-K program attend class in community-based settings, including child care centers, Head Start programs, nursery schools, private schools, and Preschool Special Education programs.³

Still, there has been far too little analysis that identifies the essential components of successful school community partnerships and what school districts and their community partners need to meet the challenges and capitalize on the opportunities.

¹ Mead, 2009.

² Holcomb, 2006.

³ Lekies and Cochran, 2001 documents the growth in enrollment in the early years of the UPK program, which have continued to the present, as reported in the most recent data on collaboration provided by the New York State Education Department, as of 2013

In-depth analysis of New York’s experience in the early years of the Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) program identified a number of “top-level” lessons for successful school district-community provider partnerships:

- Planning and initial implementation takes time, effort, and funding, as well a shared vision for collaboration, respect for all partners’ commitment to high quality services for children, and buy-in from all levels – governing bodies, executive leadership, and teachers.
- Success in UPK planning and implementation is based on an understanding of the community’s early education needs, assets, resources, and capacities.
- These capacities include those within the school district for managing and overseeing both internal and community-based prekindergarten services and those that community partners must have to blend multiple funding streams and program models and meet accountability and reporting requirements.
- Ensuring consistently high quality across settings means that community partners must have access to resources, including opportunities for training, mentoring, and technical assistance, as do program administrators, teachers, and other staff in the school district.
- Attention is needed to other equity issues, especially those related to teacher compensation and availability of qualified teachers. (Paprocki and Kolben, 2002; Holcomb, 2006)

This paper provides a summary of specific challenges that New York communities have encountered as they developed and implemented a mixed system for providing prekindergarten services. By anticipating these challenges, school districts and community-based early education programs can develop strategies to support effective partnerships, successful program implementation, and improved school readiness for young children.

Perceptions and Beliefs Affect Planning and Implementation

Perceptions and beliefs held by individuals in public education and early childhood educators working in community programs often differ and can make initiating, planning and implementing new Pre-K services difficult, even before these individuals begin to encounter structural and logistical issues created by funding streams and the variety of governance approaches, regulations, and philosophies associated with early childhood education.

Thus, identifying and addressing core attitudinal barriers is often needed as the first step in building common understanding and reaching agreement on how to address the key operational challenges. That is why guides prepared to assist with state Pre-K implementation often focus first on perceptions and beliefs that inform the public school and early childhood cultures at the local level.⁴

⁴ Gasko and Guthrow, no date (Texas); Kansas Preschool Partnership, website (Kansas); Maine’s Interagency Funding Collaborative Taskforce, 2006 (Maine); Schumacher, no date (Virginia). See also case studies of educational alignment beginning in preschool in 5 cities published by the Institute for Youth, Education & Families of the National League of Cities, 2012.

Chart 1 shows the most common perceptions and beliefs that create barriers to successful joint planning, the first step in creating and implementing a new Pre-K service.⁵

**CHART 1:
PERCEPTIONS AND BELIEFS: POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO PLANNING
AND IMPLEMENTING A MIXED DELIVERY PREKINDERGARTEN SYSTEM**

OFTEN HELD BY SCHOOL OFFICIALS AND STAFF	OFTEN HELD BY COMMUNITY-BASED LEADERS AND STAFF
Related to the other system	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerns about the ability of community-based programs to provide consistently high quality early education services • Belief that child care programs in the community do not promote school readiness skills • Concerns about the stability of program capacity among early childhood programs in the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerns that funding requirements and administration of the program by the school district will mean loss of control over both program and management • Belief that public school culture emphasizes development of academic skills at the expense of other domains of children’s development • Concerns that school-based programs will compete with community programs for both children and staff, which will lead to loss of income and budget stability
Related to internal dynamics	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerns about additional administrative requirements related to contracts with community programs • Concerns that implementing Pre-K through a mixed delivery model draws both too much attention and resources from K-12 education • K-12 education needs to be the primary focus of public education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerns that tensions may arise because of differences in compensation, benefits, and work schedules among staff, based on funding source • Concerns that financial and program requirements of the state Pre-K program will overburden limited administrative capacities

Some of the attitudes and perceptions stem from gaps in knowledge and experience, which tends to amplify the perceptions and beliefs.⁶

⁵ The Center for Public Education, 2009; Wat and Gayl, 2009. For information specific to New York, see Kolben and Paprocki, 2001.

**CHART 2:
GAPS IN KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE: POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO
STRONG SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS**

OFTEN WITHIN SCHOOL DISTRICTS	OFTEN WITHIN COMMUNITY-BASED PROVIDERS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School leaders and staff are not familiar with and therefore do not recognize and appreciate the distinct knowledge and practice appropriate to early education • Staff responsible for implementing and monitoring community programs do not have training or experience in early childhood education • School culture is primarily oriented to the needs of the child, particularly those related to academic success • School leaders, including principals and superintendents, have little experience in supervising and supporting educational services outside of traditional public school settings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-based programs do not have experience with or recognize many aspects of K-12 practices and accountability • Community-based programs vary widely, some are even multi-service agencies, and this makes it too hard to organize them as effective partners with school districts • Early childhood programs in the community are oriented to both the child and the family and are attuned to a broader range of child and family needs • Community-based providers have limited experience in developing cost-based budgets, particularly in documenting actual costs

Collaborative Planning and Decision-Making Are Critical to Success

Many observers and practitioners note that collaborative planning can help overcome challenges stemming from differences in attitudes and perceptions and gaps in knowledge. Bringing together leaders from both the school district and community programs to do a joint assessment of community needs and capacities offers the opportunity for educators to learn across systems, and especially to gain more knowledge and appreciation of what each has to offer.⁷ Over time, that knowledge of and respect for each other’s strengths and assets are essential as the community seeks to expand capacity and improve the quality of services. The growing exchange and knowledge base, combined with deepening relationships, can also help to leverage resources in all settings, to make services more

⁶ Frede, 2005; Gasko and Guthrow, no date; Kansas Preschool Partnership, website; Whitebrook et al., 2008; Mead, 2009. Specific to New York, see: Universal PreKindergarten Resource Partnership, 1999; Kolben and Paprocki, 2001; Paprocki and Kolben, 2002.

⁷ See footnote 4 and Hicks, Lekies, and Cochran, 1999. Research on the UPK program in New York has identified a number of factors that participating school districts used in identifying potential community-based partners, as described in Hicks, Lekies, and Cochran, 1999; Springsteel, 2001; and Cochran, 2004.

comprehensive and effective. These can include such services as transportation, social services and family supports, and extended-day, year-round programs to meet the diverse needs of families in individual communities. Strong school-community relationships, informed by mutual respect, are not only most likely to maximize the potential resources of a mixed delivery system, but also anchor it and sustain the program even in the face of structural and logistical challenges.

Of course, collaboration even among the best of partners has its challenges. The varied governance, regulatory frameworks, and even basic missions of various early childhood funding streams can amplify those challenges. Head Start and Pre-K, for example, are defined as educational programs; child care aims to fulfill the dual goals of supporting healthy development of young children and the needs of working parents. Yet successful state Pre-K systems demonstrate that particular practices and procedures can help mitigate those challenges. Most importantly, those practices lead to a shared vision, build trust, and deepen the relationships among the partners. Chart 3 summarizes these promising practices and procedures.

**CHART 3:
PROMISING PRACTICES AND PROCEDURES CONTRIBUTING TO
SUCCESS OF SCHOOL-COMMUNITY CHILD CARE COLLABORATIONS TO
IMPLEMENT PREKINDERGARTEN**

Area	Specific Practices & Procedures
Commitment of Staff Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitator to help guide collaborative planning and decision-making
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District staff, with knowledge and experience in early childhood development and education, responsible for implementing and managing Pre-K in all settings
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent, regularly scheduled meetings among partners with agendas that provide opportunities for mutual exchange of information
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared decision-making among both district and community providers
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written agreements that outline specific roles and responsibilities, as well as procedures for conflict resolution, cost allocation of Pre-K funding and a basis for allocating slots, enrollment and other resources

Key Decisions Merit Special Attention:

Even with good communication and joint planning, certain decisions must be made that have the potential to disrupt or even undercut the consensus that supports a mixed delivery system. It is important to take particular care and consider the impact of these decisions on all partners, as the Pre-K effort moves forward. Such decisions include:

- How program slots and therefore resources will be allocated among schools and community-based organizations. Both the public schools and community programs have an interest in ensuring stability in the use of their own facility and staff capacity.
- How child and family eligibility will be determined and where enrollment will take place – these procedures can also play an important role in the allocation of slots and resources.
- Whether resources will be sufficient for community programs to pay for certified teachers and on-going professional development to support them in attracting and retaining qualified teachers.
- Whether resources will be made available to community programs for start-up costs such as purchase of curriculum materials, staff training on curriculum, and other required equipment and materials to meet program standards.
- Whether district professional development opportunities, especially coaches and mentors, are offered jointly to staff from both school and community based programs, while recognizing and integrating the professional practices in each.
- Whether specialized support personnel such as special education resource staff will be available in all settings.
- Whether supports and services that go beyond those typically provided in a school setting – such as developmental screening, health services, family support – will be incorporated into the prekindergarten program and applied to all settings.
- Whether curriculum, child assessment, and classroom quality measures will be standardized across all settings or whether a menu of options will be allowed.
- Whether preschool classrooms in community settings will be allowed to include both children enrolled in prekindergarten with other children not currently enrolled in Pre-K.





In New York, materials were prepared to assist all parties in communities work through these key decisions, as well as other key aspects of building stronger and more durable partnerships. These included:

- “Steps to Universal Prekindergarten Guidebook: A Resource for Superintendents, School Boards, Prekindergarten Policy Advisory Boards, Teachers, Early Childhood Professionals, Policymakers, Parents, and Citizens, Volumes I and II” (SCAA, 1998)
- “A Guide to Cost Allocation Procedures: Implementing Strategies for Universal Prekindergarten” (Russell-Browne and Lederman, 1999)
- “Promising Practices: New York State Prekindergarten, Expanded Edition” (Hicks, Lekies, and Cochran, 1999).

The more that these decisions are determined through mutual, community-wide exploration of options, resources, expertise, and data, the more likely the collaboration will extend beyond contractual arrangements and create the basis for a seamless, efficient, and high quality early education system.

Implementation Raises Additional Structural and Logistical Issues

Even after these key decisions have been made, there are a number of structural factors that need to be addressed in implementing Pre-K using a mixed delivery system. These are highlighted and categorized in Chart 4.

**CHART 4:
STRUCTURAL ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED**

Issue Area	Specific Issues
Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidelines for what children should know and be able to do • Staff qualifications and credentials • Staff competencies • Learning environment • Program quality – accreditation, QRIS
Regulations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health and safety/licensing regulations • Facility/space requirements • Requirements when transporting children • Requirements regarding nutrition/meals
Monitoring/ Reporting Requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff credentials and professional development • Child eligibility and attendance • Child assessments • Child outcomes • Finances and budget
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Per child revenue • Staff salary • Staff benefits • Supplemental funding for program improvement incentives or rewards • Reimbursement policies and schedules • Family co-payments • Costs allowed
Compensation and Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compensation • Benefits • Work schedule • Professional development
Policies and Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limitations on contracting with outside providers for educational services • Procurement procedures and requirements • Accounting requirements for use of district resources

Training and technical assistance can help address some of these structural challenges. Specific lessons learned drawn from national experts who have studied state Pre-K implementation include:⁸

- Professional development for both district and community programs on the relationship of and value of early education in promoting school readiness and school success,
- Professional development and technical support to promote understanding of prekindergarten program regulations and policies,
- Professional development on current best practice in early childhood development and education,
- Technical support for both district and community child care leaders and fiscal staff -- on state and district requirements related to budgeting, cost allocation, and reporting; on specific expenses and parent fees that are and are not allowed with prekindergarten funding,
- Technical support for district staff -- on contracting, program and fiscal monitoring,
- Providing training and support to community agencies, particularly those serving linguistically, culturally, and racially diverse children and families.

Joint Professional Development Strengthens Pre-K

- One upstate urban district in New York adopted the following policies and practices, which improved the school-community partnerships and also encouraged comparable quality of education and services for children in all settings. The district provided professional development and on-site support to both community programs and public schools including modeling and mentoring. The district also allowed community programs to use Pre-K funding to enhance staff salaries, cover some of the cost for family workers, and purchase educational equipment and supplies as well as contract with consultants for professional development. (Cochran, 2004)

Similarly, New York City made resources and supports to schools and community programs, starting at the launch of Universal Prekindergarten, including training and consultation, books and curriculum materials, equipment, and social work services. In addition, many local education directors from the public school system offered joint professional development. (Springsteel, 2001)

⁸ Mead, 2009; Ryan et al., 2001; Stebbins and Scott, 2007; Whitebook et al., 2008.

Finally, there are logistical issues that arise in the initial implementation, expansion, and maintenance of a Pre-K system using a mixed delivery system to deliver the educational services. These issues are highlighted in Chart 5.

**CHART 5:
LOGISTICAL QUESTIONS TO BE RESOLVED**

Area or Function	Logistical Challenges
Recruitment/Enrollment of Eligible Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who will market the program? • How will isolated or vulnerable families be notified of the program and encouraged and supported to enroll their children? • Will enrollment be centralized or occur at local sites? How will eligibility information be obtained and determined? • Is it possible to streamline the application and eligibility determination process so that it covers multiple programs and services?
Learning Environment and Staff Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What enhancements are needed to ensure that programs in all settings comply with prekindergarten program standards and requirements? • What professional development or training will be offered to public school leaders and early childhood program directors to ensure quality and equity across systems? • How will professional development opportunities be made equally accessible to staff in all settings? What professional development needs to be added for public school leaders? For program directors in the community? • What opportunities can be developed for joint training to help build relationships, mutual respect and common understandings?
Providing Comprehensive Services and Serving Children with Special Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What services, other than prekindergarten education, will be offered to all children and families in the program? How will these services be funded? • Who will provide these services – the school district, the community program, other agencies? Will the services be offered on-site in programs, in a central location or at service locations across the community? • How will the child care needs of families be met? • How will transportation be managed when children need to move between child care and prekindergarten programs or need to access services provided off-site? • Who will have responsibility for identifying children with special needs, and developing service plans for these children? How and where will services for these children be provided?

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Area or Function	Logistical Challenges
Infrastructure Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What instruments or procedures will be used to measure and monitor high quality learning environments? • What instruments and resources will be used to assess teacher effectiveness, including classroom practice and interactions with children? • What instruments will be used to assess children’s progress and healthy development? • What resources and infrastructure will be dedicated to improving program quality in all settings? How will compliance with fiscal and administrative requirements be monitored and enforced?
Supporting Alignment K-3rd Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will Pre-K programs in all settings be aligned to ensure that children are equally prepared for kindergarten? How will children in community-based programs and their families be supported as they register and enter kindergarten? • How will information on children’s Pre-K experiences be shared with kindergarten teachers?

In some cases, the structural and logistical issues that arise in a mixed-delivery system require a careful review of standards, regulations, policies, and practices specific to particular funding streams and authorizing statutes. Often, states require that the highest or most stringent standard or regulation apply all settings, for example, in the case of early learning standards and certain health and safety practices. In other areas it may be possible to allow variations in implementation, depending on the setting and mix of funding streams. For example, variability may be possible in programs’ daily schedule and parent involvement activities.⁹ In addition, collective bargaining agreements may require variation in addressing structural or logistical issues by settings.

Looking Ahead to Pre-K Expansion in New York State

New York has nearly 20 years of experience implementing its UPK program using a mixed delivery system. With more than half the children attending class in community settings, this experience offers a wealth of lessons learned about both the challenges and successful strategies for realizing the potential of strong partnerships between public schools and early childhood programs in the community. The state is now poised to expand full-day Pre-K, with the most ambitious expansion already underway in New York City. This expansion will depend on the ability of school districts and early community programs to build on prior success and find ways to address the range of challenges discussed in this brief review. The Center for Children’s Initiatives is working actively with policymakers, early childhood and public school educators in communities across the state to learn more about innovations that can be replicated, best practices in school-community partnerships and policy areas that need more attention, in an effort add to this base of experience and provide examples of how many of these challenges can be met.

⁹ See Gasko and Guthrow, no date, for specific examples.



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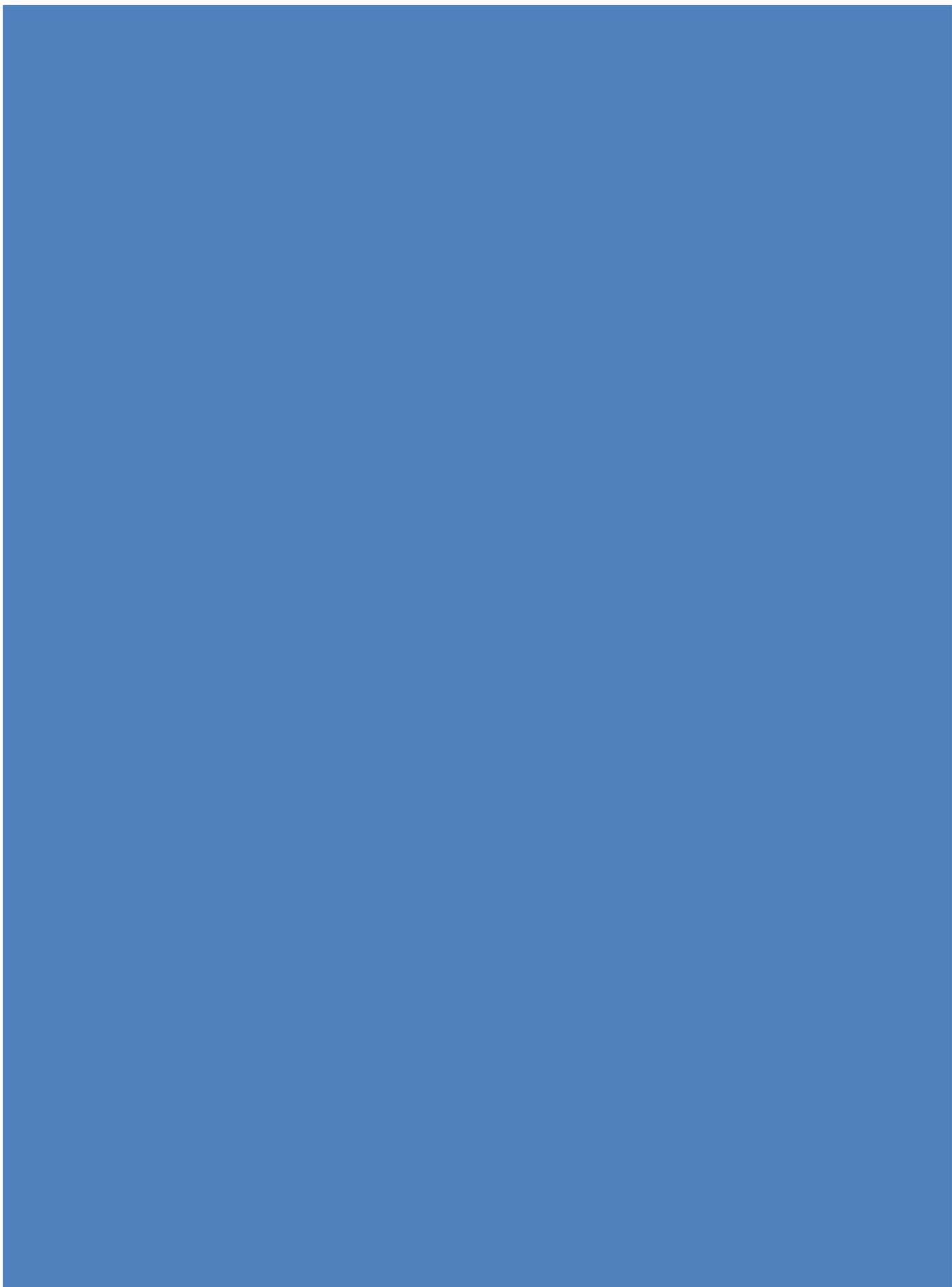
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The Center for Children's Initiatives (CCI) champions the right of all children to start life with the best possible foundation of care, health and learning. Realizing the long term benefits – for children, for families and for our society – CCI works to ensure investments in quality and supports for working families to give all of our children the opportunity for a bright future.

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