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May 28, 2009

**Testimony to NYS Assembly Committee on Children and Families and Committee on Education
NYS Senate Committee on Children and Families and Committee on Education
NYC ACS Proposal to Move Children from Child Care to Kindergarten**

Thank for you allowing me the opportunity to testify at this much needed State Legislature hearing. My name is Rosie Mendez and I represent District 2 in New York's City Council. My district encompasses the diverse neighborhoods of the East Village/Lower East Side, Gramercy Park, and Murray Hill. I am proud to say that some of the best publicly funded and utilized day cares are located in my district. ACS's plan to transition children to Department of Education (DOE) kindergartens will drastically affect children and families all across New York City. It will result in a loss of capacity for centers and additional overcrowding in our public schools. Moreover, as a result of actions taken by ACS to address its structural deficit and the economic downturn, early childhood education programs face severe budget cuts and eligible families will have fewer opportunities to find subsidized care for their children. The City and State must work together to ensure that quality and affordable day care is available for all children across all age groups.

Especially when the economy has caused increased stress for working families in New York City and in the county at large, it is particularly important that finding affordable and accessible childcare does not exacerbate family difficulties. ACS has recently testified that due to budget constraints in FY 2010 they will have to reduce about 3,000 vouchers in priority levels 7, 8, and 9. These cuts will reach working people who depend on childcare to remain in the work force. These cuts are an unacceptable means to reach a budget solution even in the most difficult times.

ACS's proposal to eliminate 3,300 kindergarten slots at contracted day care centers is extremely problematic for two reasons. First it will result in further overcrowding in our public schools and second, will likely lead to decreased capacity at our centers, forcing centers to close and losing much needed jobs. As it is being currently implemented it has lead to uncertainty and confusion.

Part of my Council District includes School District 2, which is one of the most overcrowded in the city. The influx of families during the recent residential building boom has created a huge demand for seats in many good schools in this area of Manhattan. The scarcity and cost of real estate here has made the construction of new schools particularly difficult here, and DOE has been slow to remedy this difficult problem. Now City policy is acerbating the difficulty by devoting additional classrooms to Pre-K use. The result has been that parents have been denied the right to send their children to their zone schools

and have been placed on waiting-lists. They are told to wait and see in September where their child will finally go to school. There has been insufficient notification, and siblings are being separated.

In order to supplement half day care, ACS plans to shift 5 year olds into Out of School Time (OST) programs after kindergarten hours to patch together a full day's care. Children may have to be bussed from their kindergarten programs to a separate OST program. OST is also facing overcrowding issues as well as budget cuts, and it is far from certain that OST programs have the capacity to absorb 3,300 more children. These uncertainties must be addressed in the coming weeks, and not in the coming months. Parents must be informed as early as possible on how the transition will affect their families and their jobs. ACS must work with the DOE and be held accountable for this plan. While in the long term it may be appropriate to move the responsibility for funding services for 5 year olds to another city agency, it is fundamental that right now ACS and DOE ensure transparency and communication with all stakeholders in order for this plan to be effective and successful.

I am also concerned that the transferring Pre-K 5 year olds to DOE facilities will result in the closure of more day care centers in my district and throughout the city. Over the past few years, during which more Pre-K facilities have opened in the schools, many day care centers in my district have reported difficulties in quickly compensating for the children who used those facilities. ACS intends to eliminate classrooms and programs that are under-utilized. With funds allocated by the federal stimulus package, ACS recently testified that it will retain approximately 93 of the 125 classrooms (2,000 seats) slated for closure due to under-enrollment. While I am very happy that ACS has decided to age down these under-utilized classrooms to serve 3 and 4 year olds, I am deeply concerned about what will happen when the stimulus money is no longer available. It is imperative that ACS consider the long term consequences of this short term fix. ACS must also provide technical assistance to centers in the interim so that childcare providers that have long provided quality service without incentives for operating in business-like and efficient manner can learn new techniques.

In this time of economic uncertainty, it is essential that both the City and State ensure that working families have access to safe and affordable early care and education. Preserving capacity and expanding child care to every New Yorker is the right choice for our future.