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The Road Ahead: Shaping NYC's Next Child Care RFP

Transforming the system to deliver equitable access, fair pay, and dependable full-day coverage

NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL

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Context

The expiration of the City's current child care contracts presents a pivotal opportunity to create the equitable, stable, and family- and worker-centered early childhood education (ECE) system New Yorkers deserve.

A new request for proposals (RFP) by the next mayoral administration in 2026 must move beyond preserving the status quo and should be grounded in fairness, flexibility, and neighborhood-level access. It should address structural inequities for families, providers, and the workforce, modernize outdated processes, and align birth-to-five services with the real needs of families and early childhood education providers. This presents an opportunity to fix what is not working and build the universal child care system our city needs.

The system today leaves too many behind. Families face limited access to Extended Day/Extended Year (EDY) seats, making it hard for many working parents to find care that aligns with their schedules. Fixed seat mapping and seat conversion challenges prevent resources from being deployed where they are most needed, resulting in many families being offered seats far from where they live. Enrollment processes are confusing and inefficient, with an online system that is difficult to navigate and often fails to guide families smoothly from application to placement, leaving parents frustrated.

The workforce receives chronically low pay, driving high turnover and threatening program quality and stability. Children with disabilities too often must wait for the placements and services they not only need but are required by law to be provided. Providers contend with deeply burdensome bureaucracy, from duplicative monitoring and licensing requirements to excessive paperwork, while enduring chronic late payments that destabilize operations. Data on seat vacancies, applications, and enrollment is not easy to navigate, limiting transparency and accountability. Outreach and marketing remain insufficient, especially in high-need neighborhoods and communities with significant language access needs, leaving many families unaware of available programs.

These structural and operational failings are not inevitable; they are the product of outdated systems and long-term unaddressed challenges, some inherited and compounded by a lack of solutions and underinvestment from the current mayoral administration to address them. The next RFP must directly address these barriers if New York City is to deliver the high-quality, inclusive, and accessible child care system that every family deserves. Addressing these challenges and expanding reliable access to affordable care for all New York City families in a strong early childhood education system also requires significantly increased funding commitments from the state budget.

Throughout Mayor Adams' administration, the City Council has countered disinvestment and dysfunction with concrete solutions: targeted expansions, restored funding for core child care services, and consistent oversight and pressure on the administration to prioritize children, families, and providers. Notably, in recent budgets, the Council secured major gains for extended day seats that better meet the needs of working families. Additionally, over the past four budget cycles, the Council has fought for and secured critical funding to expand and protect preschool special education seats and services, as well as support for the workforce. These investments reflect the Council's commitment to ensuring every child has access to the services and support they need and that providers have the resources to deliver them.

By securing major funding for both extended day seats and special education services, the Council has demonstrated exactly what must be embedded in the next child care RFP: a commitment to full-day, full-year access for all children, including those with disabilities. These achievements show that building the system our city needs is not solely about increasing seat counts – it's about creating a flexible, inclusive structure that ensures equitable access and meets the needs of all families.

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Core Priorities

1. Major Increase in State Funding

A strong early childhood education system that provides dependable, affordable and quality care for all New York City families requires a significant and sustained increase in funding commitments from the New York State budget.

While the City recognizes and appreciates the State's investment in child care assistance through the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) to provide income-eligible families with vouchers that help pay for care from approved providers, this support is primarily structured around individual subsidies, not direct investment in the public contracted child care system. As a result, CCAP does not fund the foundational infrastructure that supports the City's infant/toddler, 3-K, and pre-K programs delivered through DOE contracts and community-based providers. Without stronger State support for this infrastructure, New York City cannot move toward a truly universal and equitable early care system.

While the State contributes a portion of the costs for pre-K through a separate funding stream, this allocation has remained virtually flat since Fiscal Year 2019, despite rising costs. This static investment has failed to keep pace with inflation, workforce needs, and the call from families for a truly universal model. The City has been paying for 3-K almost entirely on its own since the expiration of federal stimulus funding at the end of Fiscal Year 2024. City, state, and federal dollars currently fund the limited number of infant/toddler seats in the DOE-contracted system, but this patchwork is far from sufficient to meet demand. To provide the city's families with expanded access to affordable early childhood education, the state budget must commit far greater funding support, whether through budget and/or tax policy changes enacted by the governor and state legislature.

The New York City Council has made its commitment clear. Through years of investment, program expansion, and targeted reforms, the Council has led the way in building a more accessible, equitable, and responsive early childhood education system. But the City cannot achieve a truly universal, birth-to-five system alone. To meet the scale of what working families need – and what children deserve – the State must step up with significantly increased and sustained funding.

That means going beyond one-time allocations and investing in a permanent structure of support, whether it be through increased baseline funding, dedicated formulas, or progressive revenue strategies that reflect the value of early childhood care and education. Without it, the burden will continue to fall disproportionately on the City's budget, underpaid providers, and low-income families in the very communities most in need of full-day, full-year care.

2. *Family Share:* Affordable, Inclusive, and Family-Centered Full-Day Care

A new RFP must prioritize expanding Extended Day/Extended Year seats – which provide care for up to 10 hours a day, year-round, including the summer – across age groups to meet the needs of working families, particularly those who cannot afford midday, summer, or certain holiday coverage gaps.

3-K and pre-K programs should remain free to families during core NYC Department of Education (DOE) hours, which generally follow a school day/school year schedule - typically 6 hours and 20 minutes per day, 10 months per year. While this structure mirrors the school system, it falls short for working parents who need care that aligns with the realities of a full workday. Full-day, full-year coverage offers the consistency, security, and stability families rely on to thrive.

The mismatch between standard school-day, school-year schedules and the full-day, year-round care that families need often forces parents, especially those in low-income households, to scramble for costly supplemental care, reduce their work hours, or leave the workforce altogether. At the same time, providers face administrative and financial burdens as they try to piece together multiple, and usually restrictive, funding streams to extend care beyond DOE-contracted hours.

To build a system that truly works for all families, the City's next child care RFP should explore a blended *family share* model that:

- Preserves free access to DOE's core 0–2, 3-K, and pre-K offerings during school-day/school-year hours
- Implements income-based sliding-scale contributions for extended hours and year-round care, regardless of whether the seat is in a school, center, or home-based setting, to help ensure free access for families who need it most and continued access to affordable, dependable care for all.
  - Families who can afford to make modest contributions would continue to receive affordable care while helping to support a more stable and inclusive system. Their contributions would help ensure low-income families can access extended day/year seats without cost.

A sliding scale family share structure would formalize and stabilize what many families are already doing. Currently, many parents who are offered school-day/school-year seats must piece together full-time, workday coverage at their own expense. Higher-income families often arrange care and pay for it privately, while lower-income families scramble or go without it. A family share model would bring equity and predictability to this reality and allow all families to access full workday care in one setting, while making the system more sustainable overall.

With federal funding sources for early childhood education increasingly unreliable, the City must build a multi-source, stable, long-term funding base. While significantly increased State investment remains essential, a well-designed family share model could help ensure access, preserve capacity, and reduce reliance on increasingly unstable federal dollars.

This approach is especially urgent, given that some of the highest vacancy rates in 3-K and pre-K are in low-income neighborhoods, because those families are most in need of extended day, extended year programming but lack access to it. The issue of vacant seats, particularly in low-income communities, is not due to a lack of demand – rather, it reflects a misalignment between the types of program seats and family needs.

3. Build toward a Universal, Flexible, Mixed-Delivery System

The next child care RFP must be more than an exercise in adding seats to a strained and fragmented system. It should lay the foundation for a truly universal, birth-to-five model that is grounded in strong infrastructure and designed for long-term sustainability. This means investing in a diverse network of providers – including schools, pre-K centers, NYC Early Education Centers, and family child care networks – while building the systems and supports necessary to deliver consistent, first-class care citywide.

To ensure the system can adapt to the changing needs of families, it must also provide flexibility in seat allocation and seat conversion. This would allow providers to adjust the mix of infant/toddler, 3-K, and pre-K seats based on real-time community demand, enrollment trends, and local demographics, ensuring resources are consistently aligned with where they are most needed.

4. Center Racial, Socioeconomic, and Geographic Equity

Seats for infant/toddler, 3-K, and pre-K must be equitably distributed, with a focus on high-need neighborhoods and service deserts as the City moves toward universal access. As the City expands extended day, extended year programming across all age groups, it should prioritize adding new seats in low-income communities. The allocation process should be guided by clear, data-driven criteria that incorporate race, income, and housing instability.

5. Expand Family Choice and Enrollment Flexibility

The RFP should create a dual enrollment system that allows families to register either directly through DOE or with trusted community-based organizations (CBOs), ensuring accessibility, transparency, and agency in the process.

6. Include and Support Children with Disabilities

Universal care must include all children. The next RFP should ensure that there are enough preschool special education classes available and that every setting is fully equipped for inclusive practices and services to serve children with developmental delays and disabilities, including extended day options for children who need special education classes during the school day. Universal care is not truly universal if children with disabilities are excluded from programs or can't get the services or supports they need.

7. Invest in the Workforce

A sustainable child care system depends on a stable, equitably paid, and respected workforce. The next RFP must:

- Achieve full salary parity between CBO and DOE early childhood educators, including benefits, longevity pay, added pay for extended work hours, and retirement
- Increase reimbursement rates for home-based providers to reflect the true cost of care
- Expand paid professional development opportunities and establish clear career pathways across all settings
- Provide targeted supports to help recruit, train, and retain bilingual educators and special education-certified early childhood teachers and providers
- Fund strategies to address workforce shortages, particularly in high-need neighborhoods, and support retention through mentoring, leadership development, and wellness initiatives

Photo Credit: NYC Council Media Unit

Administrative and Operational Reforms

1. Align and Simplify Agency Processes

The next child care RFP must require agencies to break down silos between NYC agencies (DOE, ACS, HRA, DOB, and DOHMH) and streamline overlapping or contradictory procedures, particularly those related to voucher eligibility, enrollment, contract execution, licensing, and permitting.

It should also prioritize coordination across all agencies involved in monitoring, inspections, and licensing for child care providers. By aligning these functions, the City can reduce duplication, minimize administrative and financial burdens, and allow providers to focus more time and resources on delivering high-quality care.

There must also be coordination between the Early Intervention and preschool special education systems and the programs funded through this RFP to ensure children with developmental delays and disabilities can get the services they need at their child care programs.

2. Fix Payment Systems

Providers need a payment system that is predictable, timely, and easy to navigate.
The next RFP should:

- Build infrastructure to ensure on-time, consistent payments to all providers
- Standardize and simplify invoice submission, contract registration, and amendment processes to prevent delays
- Guarantee timely processing of all contractually mandated payments

3. Ensure Transparency and Accountability

A reformed system must operate with clear, accessible public information and channels for feedback. This includes:

- Publishing timely, accurate data on enrollment, seat vacancies, provider status, and payment timelines
- Creating formal mechanisms for provider feedback, dispute resolution, and public reporting on agency performance

4. Fund Equitable and Culturally Responsive Outreach

To ensure that all families – particularly those in under-enrolled communities – are aware of and can access available programs, the RFP should fund a citywide multilingual outreach and engagement campaign. This campaign should use culturally competent strategies tailored to specific neighborhoods and populations, including families with limited English proficiency and residents of shelters, leveraging trusted messengers and community partners to boost enrollment and promote equitable access.

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Turning Progress into Policy

The expiration of the City's current child care contracts is a once-in-a-generation moment, and we cannot let it pass without securing the effective system that families, providers, and the workforce deserve. The Council's interventions and progress on early childhood education investments and reforms, including extended day access and special education, prove that these priorities are achievable. The next child care RFP must lock in year-round access, protect and grow special education services, invest in a stable and fairly compensated workforce, and ensure equity for every neighborhood and every child.

This is not just a policy choice: it's a test of whether our city will invest in the infrastructure families need to stay and thrive in the five boroughs. We know what works, and we've seen what's possible. As the city looks to the future, its leaders must recognize that universal child care is not just about adding seats. It requires building a system that meets the needs of working families, supports and sustains the care workforce, and delivers care that is truly inclusive and responsive to the realities of life in New York City.

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Timeline: NYC's Actions on Child Care Funding **(FY23 – FY26)**

FISCAL YEAR 2023:

- As part of the FY23 adopted budget, the Council helped secure a long-overdue pay raise for preschool special education teachers at CBOs, bringing their minimum salaries in line with 3-K and pre-K general education teachers and helping address persistent inequity in the early childhood workforce
- Promise NYC was piloted with $10 million added to provide additional seats for approximately 600-700 children (FY23 only; partial fiscal year coverage)

FISCAL YEAR 2024:

- Mayor Adams' administration excluded $283.9 million purported to "rightsize" 3-K in the FY23 November Plan), opting not to move forward with the previous mayoral administration's plan to further expand 3-K using one-time federal COVID-19 stimulus dollars set to expire the next year as additional replacement funds would already be needed to maintain existing 3-K services
- In the FY24 adopted plan, the Council added $15 million in funding to expand extended day seats (Baselined)
- Promise NYC was funded with $16 million to support approximately 600-700 seats (FY24 only; full fiscal year coverage)

FISCAL YEAR 2025:

- In the FY24 November Plan and the FY25 Preliminary Plan, the Administration reduced FY25 funding for 3-K and pre-K by a total of $170 million (to begin in FY25)
- The Council secured an additional $305 million during the FY25 budget process:
  - $92 million for 3-K to replace lapsing stimulus dollars (FY25 only)
  - $67 million to replace lapsing stimulus dollars for preschool special education contract enhancements, including salary increases for workers (Baselined)
  - $55 million for a preschool special education seat expansion (FY25 only)
  - $25 million for additional extended day seats (FY25 only)
  - $20 million in expanded 3-K funding for families without offers (FY25 only)
  - $9 million to replace lapsing stimulus dollars for preschool special education CPSE administrators who conduct IEP meetings for students (Baselined)

  - o $7 million to replace lapsing stimulus dollars for preschool special education services (Baselined)
  - o $5 million in ECE outreach and marketing funding (FY25 only)
  - o A $25 million increase for Promise NYC to provide funding for 1,000 seats (FY25 only)
- The Council called on ACS to accurately budget for the demand for child care vouchers; for FY25 and the following was added:
  - o $64.5 million to support child care vouchers (Baselined)
  - o $5 million for the City's required matching contribution for ACS vouchers for clients on public assistance (FY25 only)

FISCAL YEAR 2026:

- The Council secured a total $570 million in ECE funding for FY26:
  - o $197 million of the one-time funding that had been added in FY25 was secured in FY26 as well with $192 million of that baselined starting in FY26
  - $112 million for 3-K seats (Baselined)
  - $55 million for preschool special education classes (Baselined)
  - $25 million for extended day seats
- The total program is now baselined at $40 million
  - $5 million in ECE outreach funding (FY26 only)
  - o $80 million in additional ECE-related funding:
  - $70 million for preschool special education services (FY26 only)
  - $10 million to expand infant/toddler / 0 – 2 seats in the DOE system (FY26 only)
  - o For ACS child care vouchers:
  - o $39.5 million for the City's required matching contribution for voucher clients on public assistance (FY26 only)
  - o $228.5 million for child care vouchers (FY26 only)
  - The funding added in FY26 increased the total City portion of funding for ACS child care vouchers to $423.4 million, which surpassed the required maintenance of effort needed for the City to access $350 million in State matching funds
  - $265.6 million in city tax level dollars will be baselined starting in FY27
  - o The Council was again able to secure $25 million in funding for Promise NYC for approximately 1,000 seats (FY26 only)

Key Terms

0-2	Infant/Toddler Program
3-K	DOE funded preschool programs/seats for 3-year-olds
ACS	NYC Administration for Children's Services
DOE	NYC Department of Education
DOHMH	NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
CPSE	Committee on Preschool Special Education
ECE	Early Childhood Education
EDY	Extended Day/Extended Year seats; provide care for up to 10 hours a day, year-round, including the summer
FCC	Family Child Care, aka Family Day Care, provides care for up to eight children ages 6 weeks to 12 years in a private residence
FY	Fiscal Year
HRA	Human Resources Administration
IEP	Individualized Education Program
NYCEEC	NYC Early Education Centers, community-based organizations that contract with the DOE to provide 0-2, 3-K, and pre-K programs
Pre-K	Pre-Kindergarten; DOE funded preschool for 4-year-olds