



## New Jersey Association for the Education of Young Children

To: Senate Education Committee Hearing

From: Cindy Shields, President of the New Jersey Association for the Education of Young Children

Date: June 3, 2024

RE: Mixed Delivery

My name is Cindy Shields, I am both President of the New Jersey Association for the Education of Young Children and the Senior Child Care Director at the YMCA of Metuchen, Edison, Woodbridge & South Amboy.

NJAEYC is an affiliate of our national organization, the National Association for the Education of Young Children. NAEYC is a large nonprofit association in the United States that represents early childhood education teachers, para-educators, center directors, trainers, college educators, families of young children, policy makers, and advocates. Here in New Jersey, NJAEYC has the same representation across the state and on behalf of our members and partners, we thank you for the opportunity to have our voice represented today.

NJAEYC supports all opportunities that offer accessible, affordable, and high-quality early education for New Jersey, including preschool expansion, when delivered in an equitable way. As the President of NJAEYC, I hear from many providers across the state about various issues facing our industry, and the implementation of mixed delivery absorbs a large portion of the narrative. The main barriers that community-based providers face are things that we believe can be overcome, and I'd like to speak on just three of those barriers.

- **Contracts-** Providers are trepidatious of entering into a short-term contract with districts that are only going to cover one school year. When providers take on this partnership, they often make long term and expensive alterations to their programs with regard to programming, curriculum, staffing, enrollment, revenue and, often, even the physical layout of their school. All of this is done at the Center's expense with only a 10-month commitment from a school district. Multiyear contracts between the school district and the community provider will strengthen the provider-district relationship and give the community providers the confidence they need to invest in the collaboration.
- **Earlier Release of Contracts-** Community Providers need adequate time to prepare to partner with their local school districts. By releasing the application sooner, community providers will be able to adequately prepare; Families will be better informed and resourced about the changes in their child's care; While districts and providers will build a stronger working relationship while strategizing together about implementation of the changes and improvements.

- Finally, and most importantly, it is important for everyone to understand the barriers that have kept providers out of mixed delivery thus far, and the systems that regulate them.
  - Child care centers are required to meet the space requirements of the Department of Children & Families, Office of Licensing.
  - Centers that are rated by our state's quality rating improvement system (Grow New Jersey Kids) are required to meet a variety of elevated requirements, but the same space requirement as the Office of Licensing.
  - That means the entire New Jersey child care system operates on the same space requirement of 35 square feet per child, compared to 50 square feet as required by the Department of Education in the PEA guidance.

By creating new and differing requirements for programs to meet in order to be eligible for mixed delivery collaboration, we are creating conflicting definitions of quality for our state's 3 and 4 year olds. As an unintentional result, many community providers are unable to participate. NJAEYC understands and respects the research around space requirements, however, we are compelled to articulate the contradictions between state programs through the lens of our community providers. How is it that one heavily funded system, Grow NJ Kids, can deem a center high quality, yet another heavily funded system, Mixed Delivery can say that they are not? By maintaining different space requirements for different departments we are further fracturing the early education system in New Jersey. Ideally, we need to meet our industry where it is and build from there. If we can recognize that the majority of community providers are not eligible to meet the mixed delivery components, simply because of the size of their classrooms, and allow them to participate, we will be able to: reach more 3 and 4 year olds; provide family choice; as well as keep our infant, toddler, wrap around and summer care options in place. Only then will we be able to focus on creating facility expansion opportunities for centers to meet the research, rather than defeat an already existing infrastructure in our state.

NJAEYC is excited for the opportunity our state has to build a robust mixed delivery system that will both serve our three and four year olds, and create a strong early care and education system within our communities. We can accomplish this by understanding the true landscape of our early education system, meet it where it is, and build upon it without losing the experience, expertise, and most importantly, our essential child care industry.