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The State of Affairs of Accessible Early Childhood Education and Care in NYC

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The authors welcome feedback on this working paper. Please send all inquiries to: @amg9647@nyu.edu

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Urban Democracy Lab Working Papers are circulated for discussion and comment. They reflect ongoing research and analysis and may be revised. These papers emerge from discussion with community partners but have not gone through a process of community review as is our practice. This paper is part of a series that responds to a rare political opening: the chance to rebuild city governance around affordability, dignity, and democratic control. The papers are designed as practical tools for transition and early governing, with companion briefs for rapid circulation and working-paper versions that provide full rationale, evidence, and implementation detail. They reflect our Real Utopian orientation: feasible design of transformative institutions and policies that are egalitarian, durable, and sustainable.

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Executive Summary

New York City has been facing a steep decline of families with young children, creating a serious issue in population growth with long-term consequences. Experts have provided data as to why that may be and they all hint at the high costs of early childhood education. As a new mayoral term begins, it is time to revise the current systems in place in order to create true universal childcare and ensure New York City can become an attractive place for families to lay their roots. By creating a special taskforce and boosting the already existing programs, the new administration will be able to lay the groundwork for what will be a revolutionizing project for the families of New York.

Introduction

Universal access to early childhood education has been on the forefront of NYC's most recent mayoral race. Zohran Mamdani's election in November 2025 promises to create a new and free system in place to address one of the city's major issues: the inability for New Yorkers to raise families inside the city. What is the root of this inability and what are the current programs in place that need to be either dismantled or boosted in the transition period? NYC's Comptroller has already stated that in order for an NYC family to raise a two year old child their minimum income should sum up to around \$334,000.¹ This represents four times the average family income and is equal to the total of ten minimum wage jobs. In essence, only the super rich are able to start a family in New York City. What about the rest of New York families?

While the city is in itself responsible for providing free early childhood education to low income families, these programs' requirements for eligibility do not reflect the reality of New Yorkers in 2025. Federally subsidized programs like Headstart are meant to support financially disadvantaged families, but they only take in children ages 3 to 4 and are regulated by federal guidelines that don't take into account the high-cost of living in New York City. Take for example the "poverty line", an indicator used to measure eligibility for Headstart. Under the federal guidelines, a family of 2 (single parent, one child) would need to make less than \$27,950 a year. With the average full time minimum wage salary in NYC falling below \$35K a year, a single parent of one would not be eligible for Headstart even if they made less than the minimum wage, say \$30,000 a year. In essence, Headstart programs do not meet the needs of New York families.

Meanwhile, the cost of childcare for children below the age of three has significantly skyrocketed in the past 6 years. While the average in 2019 for center-based infant care was around \$19K a year, it has gone up to over \$25K a year. Not to mention the concerning reports of Family-based day care for infants skyrocketing over 100% of their cost. From \$10K to \$20K in less than 5 years, what was meant to be a way to center

¹ <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/child-care-affordability-and-the-benefits-of-universal-provision/>

family-based day care systems in the state of New York at an affordable price has now become a direct competitor to center based day cares. Note that these estimates are based on New York State as a whole, meaning that New York City itself would be placed on the higher side of this average.²

This inaccessibility to early childhood education has pushed families out of the city. From 2020 to 2023 alone it is estimated that the city lost about 15% of its Pre-K population. So it is no surprise that while general households in the city increased by 0.7%, the households with young children decreased by 8.7% between the aforementioned years.³ The long term effects of this migration have yet to be analyzed, but it does not take statistical information to realize that the absence of children in any society can lead to catastrophic consequences in the future. So what can the city do?

First and foremost the acceptance that accessible early childhood education and care is possible. Other North American cities have been successful in implementing such legislation for years now. Take for example the city of Montreal, which as part of the province of Quebec, adopted in 2005 the Educational Childcare Act which declared “[e]very child has a right to quality personalized educational childcare services from birth until the child’s admission to preschool or elementary school education”.⁴ In so doing, the city of Montreal has been able to ensure childcare and early childhood education to children for less than \$10 a day. A stark difference from NYC’s average of \$70 a day. While it is not a free program, it makes the total cost of childcare in the city to go below \$10K a year even in the private sector.

While of course the Montreal system will have its own flaws, it has ensured that families in the city do not have to opt to leave in order to be able to survive. The same cannot be said about New York City, where high costs of living and mismatch in social welfare requirements are constantly pushing its residents out of town. While mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani has proposed universalizing this system and creating special programs to

² <https://ocfs.ny.gov/main/reports/2024-Child-Care-Market-Rate-Survey.pdf>

³ Table 10 and 11 <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/annual-state-of-the-citys-economy-and-finances-2024/>

⁴ Article 2 <https://www.legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/fr/document/lc/S-4.1.1?langCont=en#se:2>

stimulate the formation and creation of new early childhood education and care programs, some things must be considered before doing so. What follows now is a series of recommendations meant to aid the transition committee to a realistic finish line.

Policy Options for the long run

Option 1: Attach early childhood educators to the NYC's DOE

- **Pros:** The infrastructure is already there and would ensure wage parity.
- **Cons:** NYC's DOE is facing its own issues with both funding and school system.

Option 2: Create a new department for Early Childhood Education and Care

- **Pros:** It will allow early childhood educators to be the ones in charge of their own working conditions. It will allow the city to differentiate Early Childhood Education and Care from the general public school system which has its own separate goals and needs.
- **Cons:** The creation of a new department in the city would risk pushback from the wealthy and economically conservative.

Recommendation for Transition Committee

Core Recommendation:

- Create a specific task force assigned with damage control and administering new subsidies for all families with children under the age of 5.
 - Composed of specialists in economics and education, the committee will assess budgetary expenses for immediate subsidies for all childcare programs.

- This task force will also begin drafting proposals for the two policy options described above, creating a prediction on how each policy would be implemented and what are the shortcomings.
- The Taskforce will reconvene and recommend one sole policy to the mayoral office focusing on the positive social impact on New Yorker's lives and not solely on economic advantages.

Benefits:

- This would ensure proper assessment of what is to be done and how to realistically create universal childhood education and care in New York City.
- The subsidies on the transition period will alleviate families' pockets while the administration settles in.
- The final decision, whether to incorporate it to the DOE or not, would be taken based on the social impact and not the economic one.

Conclusion and Call to Action

The implementation of universal childhood care and education must begin with a rigid plan that centers the livelihoods of families and the dignity of children in the city. While it is true that public agencies have released reports on the urgent need for reform, they do so from an economic point of view. This issue cannot be solved solely by economists who measure things in numbers and percentages and disregard the qualitative and social impacts of their policies. To truly access universal and just early childhood education and care, this administration needs to set a new legal precedent that prioritizes the wellbeing of children in parents and in doing so can redirect existing funds into this important project.