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Child Care in NYC: Scarce Resources Call for Full Enrollment

The Afro-American Parents Education Center is a 30-year-old child care center, serving 100 children ages 2-to-6 in a stand alone building in a struggling neighborhood of Jamaica, Queens. Director Beverly Campbell has 3 master's degrees and a fierce dedication to her work.

"I see every child as my own from 9:30 to 6 pm, and I get the staff to see them as their own," she says. "I am trying to put into practice the things I've learned, the things I've heard about and the things I know in my heart that I've learned as a mother and as a teacher."

While the center's excellent reputation has earned it a loyal following leading to full enrollment, Campbell also does an enormous amount of outreach. She brings the parents into the center for seminars on parenting and other subjects, takes the children out into the community for parades and other activities and invites local businesses to get involved as well. There is, not surprisingly, a waiting list for spots at Afro-American Parents; parents cite the center's excellent care and the sense of warmth, love, caring and discipline.

The success of Afro-American is just one example of why New York City has a lot to be proud of in its publicly-funded child care system. Set up 35 years ago to meet the needs of communities where New York's most vulnerable families lived, the City's child care system has for more than three decades provided high quality early education to poor families. It was the right thing to do at the time and I believe it is still the right thing to do. Preserving and strengthening this child care system has been one of my chief priorities since I became commissioner of the Administration for Children's Services nearly four years ago.

However, since the composition of New York City's neighborhoods has vastly changed over the past three decades, the need for publicly-funded child care has also changed in some neighborhoods where there are fewer eligible children. While every borough has some centers near or at enrollment, as is true at Afro-American, the reality is that there are too many centers with enrollment considerably below 85% -- and some as low as 25%. The average enrollment citywide is about 85%. As a result, last year the City spent \$40 million on more than 3,000 vacant seats citywide that could have been filled by children from low income families.

That process of paying for empty seats can no longer continue; if it does, it will cripple the long-term viability of the city's subsidized child care system. It's not fair to the children and families who are eligible for care, and it's certainly not fiscally responsible. Everyone concerned about children and families in this

City shares the same goal -- to ensure that children and families who are most in need of safe and quality child care have access to these critical services. Furthermore, we recognize at Children's Services that the loss of a center is also a loss of an important resource to the neighborhood. We would like to avert any closings, if at all possible. But everyone also needs to understand that child care is a scarce resource with limited City, State, and Federal funding to support the subsidized seats.

The reasons that some centers have trouble enrolling children while others are fully enrolled are varied; the biggest reason is that communities' demographics have changed, and there are fewer income-eligible families. But it's also true that even in those neighborhoods, some centers remain fully enrolled; these centers have managed through a variety of techniques to make their programs appealing to a wide range of families, including income-eligible families as well as those who have greater capacity to pay for the care privately.

Unfortunately, by paying for capacity rather than enrollment, the system has created a disincentive to full enrollment, or at the very least has not incentivized centers to bring in enough children to fill every seat. Directors and sponsoring boards of child care programs have many and complicated challenges facing them, so it is quite natural operating at full capacity has not been their top priority. But it must become one.

The City doesn't expect a change to full enrollment to happen overnight. Children Services will be working with centers throughout the City and will provide \$2 million in technical assistance to help with marketing and recruitment. We have convened a task force of child care professionals and advocates who are helping us to think through the best way of phasing in this new reimbursement system, and we promise to work hard to make this change as man-

ageable as possible. We already have been working to simplify and streamline the enrollment process; we have devoted two years of staff resources to support centers in achieving and maintaining full enrollment, and we have developed an intensive geographic analysis to help us respond to the changing needs of New York City communities.

Additionally, Children's Services will launch web-based enrollment and attendance in FY 2009. We are now piloting the automated enrollment system with 17 programs in Brooklyn, and the system will be effective citywide as of September. Web-based enrollment will allow us to see immediately that children have been newly enrolled. Programs will also be able

to report attendance through this web-based system, rather than through time-intensive processing of paper forms.

The good news is that we know from experience that centers which are under-enrolled do have many options. Many centers have had success by adding programs, such as Universal Pre-Kindergarten, Special Needs,

Head Start or Early Intervention. Some centers may even decide to co-locate in one building or to make other accommodations, such as combining programs.

They could also take some relatively simple measures to let the community know that there are seats available: Centers have told us that something as basic as putting up a large sign makes a big

difference; others have found that holding a parent-friendly event at the center will bring people in and create a word-of mouth buzz. Other center leaders have learned to plan ahead, taking regular care to see when children who are currently enrolled will age out, and doing the recruiting needed to fill those slots—ahead of time. Others have analyzed where the local need is – perhaps it's for very young children or for toddlers – and targeted that age group.

Some centers have also recognized that they may not be able to attain full enrollment at their contracted capacity, but can obtain full enrollment with one fewer classroom. We can reduce the contracted capacity for those centers. We expect that with the guidance of our Task Force and the help of concerned City Council members, we will be able to help many centers figure out a way to bring in the eligible children who really need this care.

The bottom line is that Project Full Enrollment is critical because for too long we have struggled to use our limited dollars to make subsidized child care available to as many children as possible while the City has been paying for vacant seats. As the cost of child care continues to rise, we can no longer support a system that is failing to meet the needs of the maximum number of eligible families in our communities.

There is a lot of understandable concern about Project Full Enrollment throughout the City's child care community and so I want to be as clear as possible about this. We are not talking about a plan to close centers—very much to the opposite. We are developing a plan to keep centers open and fully enrolled so that every child who needs care can get it. We hope that everyone who is concerned about child care will help us put an end to the tragic practice of paying for empty seats while there are children out there throughout the City who deserve a quality early childhood experience.

John B. Mattingly is Commissioner of the New York City Administration for Children's Services.



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