

# Education Solutions

*New York's Efforts to Prepare Children for Success in Schools*



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New York State leadership is committed to improved student achievement, including through a reexamination of the structure of the state's education system. With significant achievement gaps observed by the time children enter kindergarten, early childhood education is an important strategy to improve long-term student achievement. The New York State Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) serves a critical role in addressing the needs of the state's youngest children by coordinating and supporting the state's system of early childhood services, taking a comprehensive approach to ensuring that children enter kindergarten prepared for long-term school success.

Earlier this year, the Governor of New York State created the NYS Education Reform Commission (the Commission) to provide guidance on matters pertaining to education policy, performance, and innovation. The ECAC can serve as a key partner to the Commission because the ECAC's cross-cutting efforts align with the charge of the Commission to examine solution-oriented, cost-effective strategies to improve student achievement statewide. Effective investment in the youngest children is shown to generate impressive immediate return and significant mid- and long-term payoff. The ECAC helps to ensure effective investment by focusing on program and service quality, the structure of statewide delivery, and a highly effective workforce.

This brief summarizes how the work of the ECAC supports the achievement of the Commission's goals, including raising student achievement, increasing family engagement, and improving teacher quality. It explains what the ECAC is and how it works, and identifies some of the ECAC's accomplishments – including the design and implementation of new accountability and workforce development policies. The ECAC looks forward to partnering with the Commission to improve outcomes for all of New York's children.

## The ECAC is Working to Meet the Commission's Goals.

The Commission has identified three major goals, and the ECAC's work has focused on the following two:

- The Commission is charged with "examining factors in preparing, recruiting, training, and retaining high quality teachers and principals, as well as factors in developing district leadership." The ECAC has worked toward achieving this goal in the early learning years, identifying key factors in workforce quality and designing policies to address them.
- The Commission also is responsible for "examining factors in raising student achievement from prekindergarten through high school, including parental involvement and support systems for students." The ECAC's core mission already is focused on this goal, as high-quality early learning is a proven strategy for increasing both student achievement and family engagement. Research has demonstrated that high-quality early learning can have a profound impact on student outcomes. Moreover, the best early learning programs are specifically designed to engage families – ideally making programs and families true partners in meeting the needs of young children.

High-quality early learning has a significant positive impact on both short-term and long-term student outcomes. The ECAC is working to develop the state's current early learning programming into an organized coherent system of high-quality learning opportunities for at-risk children from birth through school entry. Improved coherence will make it easier for families and programs to identify and meet the needs of children and place those children on a better long-term trajectory.

## What is the ECAC and Why Was It Created?

Established in May 2009, the ECAC advises and provides strategic counsel to the State of New York and the Governor on the development of a comprehensive system of early childhood supports, embodied in a unified network of public and private services, for the state's young children and their families. The ECAC addresses programs including Head Start, child care, preschool, special education, family and community partnerships, programs for social-emotional development, home visiting programs, parenting education, child welfare preventive services, and services for children in foster care, health care, and mental health care services.

The ECAC was established at the behest of several state agency commissioners who recognized the importance of comprehensive services for young children and their families, and also in response to the federal Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007. The act instructed governors to establish state advisory councils on early childhood education and care to enhance coordination and collaboration among the variety of early childhood programs and services.

The 50-member advisory body is housed within the Council on Children and Families (CCF), a long-standing government entity tasked with coordinating health, education, and human services systems to support children and families. The ECAC reports directly to the Governor and also to the commissioners of state health, mental health, education, and human services agencies. Existing staff of the Council on Children and Families and staff funded through federal funding support the ECAC.

ECAC membership is diverse in a number of ways. Members have a wide range of expertise in early childhood, representing programs ranging across early learning and development, health care, child welfare, and

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mental health. Members also represent numerous kinds of organizations, including state agencies, other public agencies, private nonprofits, advocacy organizations, foundations, higher education, and unions. The variety of membership reflects diverse perspectives around a cohesive vision.

## The ECAC's Mission and Principles

The vision of the ECAC is “All young children are healthy, learning, and thriving in families that are supported by a full complement of services and resources essential for successful development.” The ECAC supports the state by monitoring and guiding the implementation of a range of strategies to advance this mission. To structure its work, the ECAC has a number of guiding principles that recognize and embrace the diversity of the state's children and families; acknowledge the interconnectedness of physical health, oral health, cognition, and social-emotional development; establish the primacy of parents and families; and encourage connections among state, regional, and community systems.

Following its establishment, the ECAC identified critical areas of focus, for which it created the following targeted work groups:

1. Promoting Healthy Development (health and social-emotional development)
2. Strong Families (strategies to support families)
3. Quality Improvement (a quality rating and improvement system)
4. Workforce Development (an early childhood workforce development system)
5. Data Development (systems and data necessary for a cross-early learning program longitudinal data system)
6. Finance (finance framework and cost model)

These work groups demonstrate the comprehensive approach the ECAC employs to accomplish its mission.

Recently, the ECAC created an ad hoc group focused on sustainability; this group will develop strategies and an action plan for work beyond the federal funding period.

## ECAC Accomplishments to Date

After only three years, the ECAC has led significant efforts, with sizable achievements, across the complement of early childhood supports and services. These accomplishments include the design and implementation of QUALITYstarsNY and the development of a professional development system, known as New York Works for Children, that is supported by a network of tools and resources to cultivate and support the early education workforce. Both of these efforts connect to and advance efforts around the Commission's core goals of raising student achievement and producing a quality workforce.

**QUALITYstarsNY:** The ECAC led the development of QUALITYstarsNY, an initiative designed to provide high quality early care and learning programs for young children and to assist parents in selecting the best learning opportunities for their children. The system also introduces a new level of accountability into early childhood care and education. Designed to increase the quality of early learning in centers, schools, and homes, and to maximize and monitor public investment, QUALITYstarsNY will provide actionable data to state policymakers and stakeholders to advance the ECAC's vision of ensuring that all young children are learning and thriving and ready for school

The ECAC designed and implemented a field test of the QUALITYstarsNY system in over 200 programs in 13 communities across the state. With the State Education Department dedicating \$4 million from its Race to the Top funds, the ECAC is implementing QUALITYstarsNY in a limited number (400) of early childhood education programs within targeted communities surrounding persistently low-achieving schools that serve a high-needs population. In addition to the Race to the Top funds, the ECAC has committed funds for implementation in programs that participated in the 2010 field test. Ultimately, public dollars are essential to sustain and expand the QUALITYstarsNY initiative statewide. The ECAC is leading efforts to ensure this sustainability and have designed the initiative in a way that will justify the expenditure of those public dollars and provide a strong return on that investment.



**Workforce Development and Quality:** A central focus of the ECAC's work has been building the profession of early childhood educators to advance its vision of ensuring that all young children in the state are learning and thriving. New York Works for Children has been created to recruit a highly effective workforce; establish a statewide database to track teacher qualifications, preparation, and professional development; and build a system of training approval.

Further, the ECAC has produced a number of publications aimed at this goal, including the competency-based New York State Core Body of Knowledge, which establishes the core content for early childhood teacher education, staff supervision, and training/professional development design. Other publications include the:

- *New York State Early Learning Guidelines*, which describes a developmental progression of typical child development to inform educators and parents and to offer strategies to support a child's full development in all domains.
- *New York State Early Learning Alignment Crosswalk*, which compares three frameworks of early learning progressions, including the "Prekindergarten Foundations for the Common Core" to demonstrate alignment on expectations of child development.

These documents, which are being promoted as foundational resources for teacher education in the state, are being shared throughout the early childhood field. The ECAC has begun to implement its Core Body of Knowledge and *Early Learning Guidelines* framework statewide to inform teacher certification programs that develop educators. These tools also support best practices for those entrusted with leading programs and supervising staff. The alignment of the *Early Learning Guidelines*, the state's Prekindergarten Learning

Standards, and the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework will further assist early learning educators in their professional development.

These two areas of effort are representative of the comprehensive work of the ECAC. **Other Representative Accomplishments**, including those directed at system effectiveness, child development, student achievement, workforce quality, and other goals, are as follows:

- **Supporting Strong Families:** To advance its vision that all children will be thriving in families that are fully supported by state services and resources, the ECAC is working to more completely engage families. This includes working with the New York State Parenting Education Partnership (NYSPEP) to increase access to evidence-based parenting education, developing a New Parent Kit for all new parents, and establishing a Community Café program to build parent leadership and community capacity.
- **Early Learning Data System:** To provide stakeholders with actionable information and to encourage connections among state, regional, and community systems, the ECAC is designing an early learning data system. The ECAC plans to link this system to the P-20 student tracking system being developed by the New York State Education Department.
- **Early Childhood Cost Estimation Model:** Working with an education policy consulting firm, the ECAC has collected the information needed to populate a cost model that will determine the costs of service elements that comprise a comprehensive system of supports and services; this cost model can be used to support the development of financing strategies by identifying efficient practices that advance child health, learning, and success.
- **NYS Shared Services Alliance Project:** Sponsored by the ECAC, a New York State Shared Services Alliance Project would serve as a vehicle to streamline administration, costs, and delivery of services among small early learning and development programs located across the state.
- **Developmental Screening:** With the ECAC vision of ensuring that all young children are healthy, the Promoting Healthy Development Work Group is

spearheading efforts to expand routine developmental screening for all children. This has included working with the Department of Health and the Medicaid Redesign team on strategies that encourage pediatricians to conduct periodic developmental screenings and developing brochures for parents and for professionals on the importance of developmental screening.

- **Social-Emotional Development:** Recognizing the interconnectedness of physical health, oral health, cognition, and social-emotional development, the ECAC is working with consultants to develop an online database of information about the social-emotional development of young children and identify and provide evidence-based training programs for professionals who work with young children.
- **Supporting Rural Areas:** Consistent with its comprehensive focus on local and regional communities, the ECAC contracted with the National Opinion Resource Center to examine high-need rural areas in the state and analyze the needs of parents and caregivers in those regions.

As these examples of action-oriented activities illustrate, the efforts of the ECAC align with its charge to address the needs of the state's young children and their families through the development of a comprehensive system of early childhood supports. The full and inclusive approach that the ECAC has taken is generating solutions to challenges that the state faces.

## Conclusion

The ECAC is successfully serving an integral role in both connecting and strengthening relationships across the sectors that serve the state's children and their families and in uniting specific projects, activities, and resources. It can be an essential partner to the Commission, overseeing the many efforts under way in early childhood care and education, creating strong linkages between the early education and K-12 systems, and instituting reform that will strengthen the state's public education system, improve student achievement statewide, and reduce the achievement gap.

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