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### OP-ED: MAKE HIGH-QUALITY PRESCHOOL ACCESSIBLE FOR ALL CHILDREN IN NJ

KIRAN HANDA GAUDIOSO | DECEMBER 18, 2015

Far too many of our kids attend programs that may or may not be effective - and affordability is a major factor



*Kiran Handa Gaudio*

New Jersey's publicly-funded preschool program is considered a national model for high quality - for some 50,000 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds living in 35 towns.

But as NJ Spotlight's preschool series points out, there is zero guarantee of quality for the 350,000 other children attending a patchwork of licensed and unlicensed preschools across the state.

It can cost a family more to send a child to preschool than to community college, which puts quality out of reach for many. These hundreds of thousands of children are attending programs that may or may not be effective, at an age that is widely recognized as critical for their development and, therefore, our state's future.

Financial hardship is not limited to the families living in those 35 towns with state-funded preschool programs. United Way of Northern New Jersey research has shown that 890,000 hardworking families we call ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) are struggling to make ends meet across all our communities.

ALICE parents, who work in jobs critical to our communities, including the very preschool teachers educating our young children, are largely left to fend for themselves when it comes to finding and affording quality care for their children.

It is critical for the well-being of our communities that families have access to a quality education, regardless of family income. This is why we are heavily invested in this issue and have been for more than a dozen years now - to the tune of nearly \$1 million a year.

The impact of our investment has been higher-quality programs, better-trained staff, and higher rates of kindergarten readiness among the children served. The payoff is real and tangible.

It's time New Jersey made ensuring quality preschool for more families a top priority.

A good first step would be raising the state’s subsidy for struggling families across the state who don’t currently have access to New Jersey’s gold standard program.

Today, child care centers that accept the state’s preschool subsidy receive just \$26 a day to educate a child. The state spends double that in its model program. How are centers to provide a safe and engaging atmosphere to educate our children and prepare our future workforce on \$26?

Research by the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University says it’s likely that they aren’t. On average, quality was “less than good” in a study of hundreds of centers.

The last time the state raised the subsidy for working families was 2008. A lot has changed since then. The state has become even less affordable. The cost of basic necessities has grown by 19 percent, according to the United Way ALICE Report.

This year, our United Way provided funding so that 1,000 children from ALICE households could attend quality centers across our region in Morris, Somerset, suburban Essex, Sussex and Warren counties.

It’s an uphill battle. We addressed only a fraction of the need. Some 100 centers in our footprint closed over the past four years.

Our partner centers tell us the United Way funding helps to bridge a portion of the gap between the state subsidy and the true cost of running a quality preschool program. To address this, we believe the state’s subsidy should be raised to promote quality and take into account regional costs of living.

At our **recent United for ALICE event**, former Republican Gov. Thomas H. Kean and Democratic U.S. Sen. Cory Booker said that expanding access to affordable preschool should be a state priority. They said it can be done.

Quality preschool gives parents peace of mind to be productive working citizens who can contribute to the state economy. It also gives our next generation of workers a solid foundation for school and life.

We ask our state’s legislators to listen to the collective chorus of voices that is growing on this bipartisan issue and decide to put our children’s future - our state’s future - at the top of their priorities in 2016.

Kiran Handa Gaudio is senior vice president, Community Impact and Community Relations, with United Way of Northern New Jersey

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