



UNITED NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSES

45 Broadway | 22nd Floor | New York, NY 10006
(212) 967-0322 | www.unhny.org

**Testimony of United Neighborhood Houses
Before the New York City Council Committee on Youth
Honorable Debi Rose, Chair
And the New York City Council Committee on Gender Equity
Honorable Helen Rosenthal, Chair**

**Oversight – DYCD Learning Labs
Presented by Gregory Brender, Director of Children and Youth Services**

November 18, 2020

Thank you Chair Rose and Chair Rosenthal and members of the Committee on Youth and the Committee on Gender Equity for the opportunity to testify about Learning Labs. United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) is a policy and social change organization representing 44 neighborhood settlement houses that reach 765,000 New Yorkers from all walks of life.

A progressive leader for more than 100 years, UNH is stewarding a new era for New York’s settlement house movement. We mobilize our members and their communities to advocate for good public policies and promote strong organizations and practices that keep neighborhoods resilient and thriving for all New Yorkers. UNH leads advocacy and partners with our members on a range of issues including civic and community engagement, neighborhood affordability, healthy aging, early childhood education, adult literacy, and youth development. We also provide professional development and peer learning to build the skills and leadership capabilities of settlement house staff at all levels.

This testimony focuses on the significant challenges that the City’s community-based organizations who support children and youth have faced during COVID-19, the City’s new Learning Labs/Learning Bridges Program, and makes recommendations for strengthened support and partnership with this sector—which will be crucial to ensure the success of this academic year. (Note: for this testimony, we will refer to this program as “Learning Labs”).

Increased Role of CBOs in the Response to COVID-19

Community-based organizations (CBOs) are an indispensable part of the City’s education system, playing a leading role in several aspects of children and youth support and development. Learning Labs are just one of the key examples of how settlement houses and other community-based organizations have dramatically changed and increased services for children and youth in response to the new demands of COVID-19. Other examples include:

- **Remote Programming:** In March, early childhood education, youth employment and after-school programs rapidly transitioned to virtual programming which kept children connected to their peers and to adults focused on their support and educational enrichment.
- **Regional Enrichment Centers (RECs):** CBOs operated early childhood Regional Enrichment Centers, providing in-person child care and education to young children of essential workers. CBO staff also played key roles in operating the school-age RECs that

were located in public school buildings. CBO staff brought their expertise in Youth Development to design socially distant activities that were engaging and supportive for participants.

- **Five Day Per Week Early Childhood Programs:** With the public school's transition to a hybrid model, CBOs are the only place that offer free or low-cost early childhood education five days per week at the same location with the same staff and teachers. As was stated last week by Mayor de Blasio and by the Department of Education (DOE), in the case of a school building closure due to COVID-19 transmission, public school 3-K and Pre-K programs would close, yet CBO-based 3-K and Pre-K programs would be expected to continue operations.

CBO staff have gone to significant lengths to provide essential services during this time of significant stress and upheaval for the City's children and youth. However, the City has not adequately supported CBOs, making it difficult for them to carry out programming and focus on working with children and youth. CBO programs depend on successful high-level collaboration between City agencies. Unfortunately, this has often been lacking throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and CBOs have been left to make sense of missing or conflicting guidance from Department of Education (DOE), Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), and Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD).

This led to issues such as:

- After-school programs not having clarity as to what space they are able to use in school buildings, or receiving exorbitant permit fees;
- Lack of communication to CBOs operating in schools about school health issues and decisions from the situation room; and
- Learning Bridges programs facing the expectation of ramping up in a matter of weeks with many unanswered questions.

Learning Labs

When the Learning Lab RFI was released, there were significant open questions about health and safety, program operations and budget. The list of questions that UNH developed through convening providers is attached to this testimony. Though some have been answered, this document frames the initial challenges with starting Learning Lab programs and underscores the difficulties providers faced in determining whether to open a Learning Lab in the first place.

To date, Learning Labs have not seen the levels of enrollment that were initially anticipated by the City. The DOE shared in mid-October that approximately 30,000 students were enrolled in Learning Lab/Learning Bridges programs (inclusive of 3-k through grade 8 students) at 300 sites, with 19,000 families receiving a placement offer. This falls far short of the City's projection of serving 100,000 students at the start of the school year. Providers have reported lower attendance at Learning Labs, though there are some with higher or full enrollment. It is important for the DYCD and DOE to explore this and understand why enrollment is low, and what steps must be taken to ensure that any student who needs to attend a Learning Lab is connected to one. For example, DYCD and DOE should examine the extensive enrollment process and understand whether that has acted as a barrier to families and contributed to low Learning Lab attendance.

Currently, New York City is approaching the 3% COVID-19 testing rate that would require school buildings to close and all students to transition to full-time remote learning for at least two weeks. It is crucial that if New York City abides by this 3% testing threshold moving forward, that Learning Lab

providers receive consistent, up-to-date information about testing rates so that they can prepare for school building closures.

We also must recognize that keeping Learning Labs open during any school shutdowns requires those staff to risk their own health and safety to keep providing emergency child care for New York City families. Everyone recognizes that child care is essential, and that programs need to continue operations in order to help working families who rely on these services. But we cannot expect staff at these community-based organizations, who are largely paid less than staff and teachers in public schools, to simply continue working in-person if COVID-19 transmission rates continue to rise. They must be offered incentive pay to compensate for the health and safety risk they are taking on as they continue to operate in-person programming.

Recommendations

UNH makes the following recommendations to ensure the success of Learning Labs:

- **Have clear, consistent communication with Learning Lab providers if New York City faces a system-wide school building shutdown.** DYCD should email providers each day with that day's citywide COVID-19 testing rate, so that everyone is receiving the same information and is up to speed on whether school buildings might close. This simple act could dispel some of the communication challenges and ensure that providers are ready for school building closures, should we reach that point.
- **Maintain consistent funding for Learning Labs regardless of enrollment or attendance.** Learning Labs are an emergency child care system. They are needed by the essential workers who depend on them and are valuable to the children who participate. However, unlike other programs in the Youth Development field, CBOs should not be focusing on recruitment or retention of program participants. The Learning Labs must be maintained for those families that do need them, when they need them. Therefore, Learning Lab budgets should remain consistent regardless of enrollment and attendance.
- **Allow greater flexibility in contracts around scheduling.** CBOs receive a roster of students from the DOE, but that roster does not include when those students have remote or in-person days in their schools. CBOs need the ability to manage their own schedules to maintain socially distanced small group sizes, ensure adequate staff time at all times that students are present, and maintain a pod model consistent with the children's schools.

As mentioned in the previous recommendation, Learning Labs operate as an emergency child care system. Learning Labs should not be penalized for meeting the needs of families who need partial day coverage and should have the flexibility to schedule students for shorter periods than the full school day.

- **Allow Learning Labs to provide after-school to all participants at the site rather than have students go home at 3pm to log on to remote after-school.** Most Learning Labs are run by CBOs who are also after-school providers. Many of these organizations are partnered with the schools with whom they already have relationships through providing services such as after-school programs or community schools. Requiring students to leave at 3pm to go home for remote programming will not help working parents' child care needs, when ostensibly these programs will be aiming to do just that.

- **Provide additional resources needed to bring on more staff in Learning Labs that will be able to expand the number of students per day.** Learning Labs were awarded with a number of slots that were to be filled on a hybrid model. If schools are shut down, Learning Labs will be expected to provide services for the same children

A Learning Lab slot was designed to serve more than one child. But that model does not work if students have no in-person school days. For instance, if a Learning Lab received 40 slots, it will serve 20 students on day A, and 20 students on day B. If schools close, and all 40 students will be served by one site on both A and B days, then resources must be increased to serve students under the health and safety guidelines.

- **Provide incentive pay to the staff working in Learning Labs in the event of school building closures.** School building closures indicate that COVID-19 transmission levels are so high, that it is not safe to continue in-person schooling. However, the City has indicated that CBO staff will still be expected to operate Learning Labs in-person. These staff must receive incentive pay to recognize the health and safety risks they are taking.
- **Clear the Backlog of staff awaiting Comprehensive Background Checks.** Many Learning Labs operate on the restrictive single use license because they cannot get their staff cleared through for the School Aged Child Care License which would permit a greater amount of activity.
- **Begin planning for long-term school building closures.** At the moment, New York City faces a second wave of COVID-19, and thus potential long-term closures of New York City school buildings like in spring 2020. While our city must do everything in its power to avoid that level of disruption to students' education, we also must begin planning for the possibility of long-term school building closures. If Learning Labs will continue as the main form of emergency child care in that instance, they will need more resources and space (as referenced above) to do that.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions and can be reached for more information at gbrender@unhny.org.



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United Neighborhood Houses Comments on the Learning Bridges RFI

August 27, 2020

COVID-19 has highlighted and exacerbated significant disparities in New York City, including access to high-quality, reliable, and affordable child care. UNH and settlement houses have been long-time advocates for access to child care and after-school programming, and have significant experience providing these programs. Since COVID-19 began in March 2020, settlement houses have stepped up and provided both in-person child care in Regional Enrichment Centers (RECs) and remote activities and support for New York City's youth. We appreciate the City's efforts to provide child care for working families when public schools return to a blended instruction model in the fall. However, the City must ensure that this program model both provides necessary child care and addresses the risks of spreading COVID-19.

The City's current proposed model for Learning Bridges Programs to provide child care for children in 3-K and Pre-K programs and grades K-8 on remote learning days must be structured to that it does not risk increasing community spread of COVID-19. The proposal as it stands does not state whether students participating in the Learning Bridges Programs would be from the same classroom or even the same school. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidance urges school districts to adopt a cohort or pod model wherein students stay in static groups with the same classmates and teachers all day.^{1,2} If students in the Learning Bridges Programs were coming from different classrooms or even schools, the City would be creating a risk for the transmission to students and staff members in multiple community-based organizations and schools. We urge the City to consider this crucial aspect of the Learning Bridges Program and to implement a safe cohort model for this program. Otherwise, the task of contact tracing and isolating Learning Bridges staff and participants will become that much more complicated when a student or staff member contracts COVID-19.

Furthermore, CBO staff must be afforded the same protections as teachers and staff in public schools. This includes:

- Regular, consistent cleaning of all facilities;
- Personal protective equipment (PPE) and other supply needs;
- Ensuring a small and static group of children and adults with whom each staff member comes into contact; and
- Funding for health and safety requirements, including an on-site nurse.

CBOs have been providing socially distant in-person summer camps and CBO staff have designed and executed programs in the City's Regional Enrichment Centers. They have conducted programs safely through extensive social distancing measures including limiting classrooms to 9 children. However,

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/schools.html>

² <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/guidance-for-childcare.html>

the Learning Bridges RFI allows up to 10 children through age 9 and up to 15 children ages 10-12 in a single classroom. It is important that these discrepancies be rectified and clear and consistent guidelines on classroom size be issued. UNH urges the City to come to the table immediately with CBO providers to design a safe, socially distant way to provide child care for New York's families through this crisis and recovery.

Below are more extensive questions and concerns from providers around key aspects of the Learning Bridges Program. We look forward to working with the City to address the following questions in order to ensure a safe and healthy start of the Learning Bridges Program:

Health and Safety Measures

1. Will providers be able to conduct a health screening (i.e., asking about symptoms and checking temperature) for all persons who come into a space used for Learning Bridges? Will providers have access to temperature scanners and other equipment to conduct health screenings? This is particularly important for any Learning Bridges Program that is conducted in a space that where CBO does not have full oversight.
2. Will CBO contractors have control of who enters the sites? Do providers have the authority to eject people if they are exhibiting symptoms or not following social distancing guidelines such as not wearing masks?
3. What support will DYCD, DOHMH and other agencies provide to expedite the issuance of new School-Age Child Care (SACC) licenses? Will the 3-K and Pre-K programs be able to use the emergency child care provisions used in Regional Enrichment Centers to allow the transfer of staff between sites? Given that licenses tend to take a significant amount of lead time, what will the City do to expedite the process of clearing new sites?
4. Will programs need to expand licenses for either early childhood or SACC if they are using space that also hosts an existing early childhood education or youth development program?
5. Will providers be able to clear staff only through the DOE PETS system in sites outside of school buildings? The Comprehensive Background Check System, which was waived temporarily in March 2020, is significantly backlogged and has been unable to clear staff quickly. It also does not allow for transfer of staff between sites, something that would be crucial for assigning staff to the correct Learning Bridges Program site.
6. Will the City guarantee that programs that providers have an adequate amount of time for cleaning between when one group leaves a classroom and another enters if an organization is operating a Learning Bridges program in spaces such as a Cornerstone or center-based after-school programs which provide after-school at a different time than the Learning Bridge?
7. What guidance will the City provide around safe drop-off and pickup protocols?

Impact on Existing Programs

1. Will existing early childhood education and after-school programs in non-school buildings continue to operate fully funded in the school year if they do not participate in the Learning Bridges Program?
2. Will existing early childhood education programs maintain their budgets if their classroom size for 3-year old and 4-year old children is reduced to 15 children per classroom? Costs including rent and staffing are not lower with the mandated changes. If yes, please communicate with providers.
3. If Learning Bridges Programs are placed at sites such as Cornerstone Community Centers that also have an after-school programs, will they be serving some or all of the same children? Will

programs be able to limit participation in Learning Bridges programs to either participants in their own programs, or students in the schools with which CBOs already have a relationship?

4. Is the City planning for continued youth engagement if there is a second wave of COVID-19?

Space

1. What spaces and rooms is the City scouting for Learning Bridges programs? The Mayor mentioned libraries and cultural institutions. What level of authority would CBOs have at these sites to make physical changes or repairs? Who will handle maintenance at these sites?
2. Is the City considering using temporary trailers? If so, what steps will be taken to ensure that social distancing can be maintained in trailer sites?
3. Will ventilation standards and inspections be the same as in public schools?
4. Will all programs have access to outdoor space?
5. Will the City close streets to ensure outdoor space for programs?
6. Will the City allow providers exclusive access to space in playgrounds or parks?

Staffing

1. Will Learning Bridges programs be funded to have:
 - a. Nurses
 - b. Safety Agents
 - c. Cooks
 - d. Licensed teachers in early childhood education programs
2. In order to limit the amount of exposure of any child or adult to multiple groups, guidance from NYC Department of Mental Health and Hygiene (DOHMH) strongly discourages early childhood education providers from using floaters or substitutes in order to maintain ratios. Will providers be funded to have three teachers per classroom so that ratios can be maintained if one teacher is temporarily out of the classroom?
3. Will staff, teachers and directors in early childhood education programs be paid at the levels of the DC 37/ Day Care Council Collective Bargaining Agreement?
4. What will the pay scales be for K-8 programs?
5. Will there be incentive pay for staff?
6. Will existing CBO staff be asked to work their standard afterschool hours while also staffing the Learning Bridges Programs from 8 am – 3 pm? When will providers be notified about these issues?

Program Design / Eligibility / Funding

1. Do students who are in the same classroom when they are in-person at school stay in the same classroom when they are at a Learning Bridges Program? This is important not just for health and safety purposes but also to ensure that activities in the Learning Bridges programs align with the students' curricula.
2. Will Learning Bridges Programs be assisting with remote learning? How much of the day is expected to be remote learning or other activities?
3. When Learning Bridges programs end at 3 pm, will the same students have the option to stay for afterschool programming? What about students in-person at school that day?
4. Will there be separate full-week programming available for the essential workforce, similar to the Regional Enrichment Centers? Will staff working at the Learning Bridges Program have priority for access to child care?

5. Will children enrolled in Head Start programs with direct Federal contracts be eligible for Learning Bridges services?
6. Will parent fees be waived for families in EarlyLearn/ Extended Day Programs? What policies will be in place to ensure that families do not lose access to care?
7. How will supports be designed to support children K-8 with different educational and developmental needs?
8. DOE has committed to provide computers for Learning Bridges programs. Will the City also provide the internet capabilities to ensure that students are engaged online at the same time?
9. Will busing be available for children to and from Learning Bridges programs? How will buses maintain social distancing?
10. When and how will providers be informed of decisions on these issues?

Communication

1. What is the plan for communicating this model and guidance with families?
2. Will programs have the additional support including training and access to support staff from DOE that RECs have?
3. Will DYCD/ DOE provide a calendar of activities that are happening remotely to allow providers to align activities with remote learning?