



New York State Child Care for All

Executive Summary

New York is presented with an unprecedented opportunity to achieve universal child care. In January 2025—and many times since—Governor Hochul committed to achieving universal child care statewide, and her own Child Care Availability Task Force (CCATF) released a Roadmap for Universal Child Care.¹ Among State legislators, there is strong support for investment in child care, and for achieving a universal system.

In New York City, Mayor-elect Mamdani has made universal child care a cornerstone of his affordability agenda, and a top priority of his first term. He and Governor Hochul have committed to working together to achieve this shared goal—in New York City, and across the state.

The Empire State Campaign for Child Care is a statewide coalition of parents, child care educators, and advocates who have been working together since 2017 to ensure that every family in New York State has access to free, high-quality child care, and that every child care educator earns a thriving wage.

Our campaign's plan for statewide universal child care is guided by the CCATF's Roadmap for Universal Child Care, but goes further than its high-level set of goals—setting forth a concrete rollout plan guided by the following principles:

- **Raise child care worker wages** immediately to stabilize the existing system and build capacity by recruiting and retaining early childhood educators.
- **Prioritize low-income families** during the rollout to universal child care, either receiving care under New York State's Child Care Assistance Program—the principal means of public funding to help children from low- and moderate-income families access child care—or through a universal child care bridge project. To do this, New York must continue to expand investment in the Child Care Assistance Program while the state is shifting toward universal child care.
- **Protect middle-income families** from rate hikes, benefits cliffs, and shifting supply as the state scales up to universal child care.
- Recognize that families of varying income levels struggle to afford or access child care and deserve relief.
- **Include afterschool care, summer care and evening and weekend care**, recognizing that families' need for child care doesn't exist only Monday through Friday, 9 to 5, nor does it end when a child enters pre-K or Kindergarten.

- **Maximize federal funding** while building to universal child care.
- **Accommodate the diversity of the multiple existing systems of care** and early childhood education throughout the state.
- **Support all types of care to ensure families have the freedom to choose** the care setting that best meets their needs and to ensure we preserve capacity in all settings—home, center and school-based during the rollout. It will take all existing capacity, plus additional new capacity to meet the growth in demand that will come with a commitment to universal care.

The Empire State Campaign for Child Care’s Plan for statewide universal child care features four main components:

1) Increase child care supply and quality throughout New York State by providing the child care workforce a sustained hike in compensation

New York State’s ability to deliver universal child care depends on the supply of care throughout the state. Transitioning from a limited, broken market to a system of universal coverage with options that meet families’ needs will take time, sound planning, and considerable public investment. It will also require a thriving workforce. While the child care system capacity has grown over the past several years, the sector still experiences considerable workforce shortages and inadequate pay.

The most immediate way to increase child care supply and quality throughout New York is to adopt legislation proposed by Senator Jabari Brisport and Assemblymember Andrew Hevesi (S.5533/A.492-A) that would implement the workforce compensation increases outlined in the CCATF Roadmap to Universal Child Care.²

2) Further strengthen New York’s Child Care Assistance Program starting by clearing the waitlists

New York State’s Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) is the principal means of public funding to help children from low- and moderate-income families access child care while their parents work or pursue an education. The growth in CCAP over the past several years demonstrates the value of these reforms and the support this program provides to families across New York. Notably, as of October 2025, 27 counties have closed enrollment or started waitlists due to inadequate funding to meet need. These shortfalls have disrupted the lives of tens of thousands of working families across the state.

Necessary reforms include fully funding the program to serve all families who apply and are eligible for assistance, shifting management of this program to New York State, fully eliminating parent co-payments, and streamlining the process to receive assistance. All of these reforms would help stabilize CCAP to meet the needs of low-income working families while at the same time building a strong infrastructure for universal child care.

3) Adopt Community Eligibility Standards for Child Care Assistance

Federal law limits CCAP eligibility to families who meet certain programmatic, immigration, and income requirements. A complex application process designed to comply with federal requirements subjects families to significant means-testing, paperwork requirements, and other barriers. To transition to universal child care, policymakers should borrow from the successful approach employed by New York State in transitioning from a free and reduced price school meals program to a system of universal free school meals.

New York State should adopt a CCAP *community eligibility provision* for children residing in communities where a high share of children under 13 reside in households that are income eligible for the Child Care Assistance Program. These families would not be subject to the same paperwork requirements and would not have to prove eligibility for the program at an individual household level. Instead, they would need to indicate through a simple application process that they seek child care and provide proof of address to demonstrate that they reside within a community eligible district. Families residing in community eligibility districts would not be required to contribute co-payments.

4) Cap out-of-pocket child care costs for families outside community eligibility areas and not enrolled in the Child Care Assistance Program

Policymakers should also offer substantial support to families in other parts of the state who also struggle to afford the high cost of child care but are not initially covered under the community eligibility program and do not receive support from CCAP. To support these families, as well as other households who are hesitant to engage in what many consider to be an intrusive and burdensome CCAP application process (including immigrant families), the state should introduce a program that would cap per-child, out-of-pocket costs at \$100 a week (or \$20 a day). Under this program, New York State would cover the remainder of the cost of care at participating providers, up to the reimbursement rate set by the Office of Children and Family Services.

Implementation Plan

The 2026-27 New York State Budget should take substantial steps towards making universal child care a reality across New York State.

Specifically, the enacted state budget should include the following provisions:

- Enact the \$1.2 billion workforce compensation program detailed in Governor Hochul's Child Care Availability Task Force's Roadmap to Universal Child Care.
- Include sufficient funding for the Child Care Assistance Program to clear the waitlists and ensure eligible families throughout the state can receive assistance.
- Invest \$75 million to partner with several local social service districts to develop and implement the community eligibility for child care assistance.

- Invest \$75 million to cap child care costs at \$100 a week per child in three or four communities in New York State.

The community eligibility roll-out and the capped-fee project must start relatively small to allow the Office of Children and Family Services to work out the operational details of this approach. However, once they do so, those efforts should expand as quickly as possible to ensure that all New Yorkers seeking child care can benefit from those programs.

We envision this rollout taking 6 years and ultimately achieving a system whereby every family in New York can access free child care up through 12 years old, much like how every free school meal was eventually covered through expansions in the school meals community eligibility process.

New York would maximize federal funding during the implementation phase by concentrating all federal CCAP funding and required state matching funds on counties and communities still offering traditional CCAP. After full implementation of New York State Child Care for All, federal funding will be maximized by using administrative data and an aligned application process between SNAP and the Child Care Assistance Program. This would allow New York to access federal funds for child care without unduly burdening families receiving care.

About the Empire State Campaign for Child Care

The Empire State Campaign for Child Care is a statewide coalition of parents, child care educators, and advocates who believe that every family in New York State deserves high quality, universal child care and that every child care educator deserves to earn a thriving wage.

The campaign was founded in 2017, and advocates at the state and federal levels for investment in child care that best serves the needs of all of New York's families and child care educators.

The Empire State Campaign for Child Care's Vision of Universal Child Care

Universal child care is free child care for all. It means that every family, regardless of income, immigration status, or zip code—inclusive of families of children with disabilities—can access high-quality, free child care for all children under age 13, in the setting of their choice—school, center, or home-based care. Universal child care is free from intrusive applications, work reporting or immigration status requirements, or long processing times. It means that every child care educator earns a thriving wage that reflects the true cost of care. Universal child care means that child care is treated as a public good, rather than a private family burden.

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