



Photo: Kamille Vargas

What Family Child Care Will Mean for 3K

by Kendra Hurley

When de Blasio ran for re-election with the ambitious promise of offering free preschool to the city's 3-year-olds, classes in living rooms were most likely not what he or voters had in mind. As with Pre-K-for-All for 4-year-olds, the Department of Education (DOE) would open new 3K classes in public schools and well-staffed child care centers that are "experienced in providing high-quality early childhood education and care," an early press release announced.

But last month, just over a year into 3K's multi-year rollout beginning in a handful of neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty, DOE revealed its intention to bring 3K into the more loosely regulated world of home-based child care settings.

Adding a critical mass of home daycares to the 3K mix will allow the City to more easily serve 3-year-olds in neighborhoods where space in schools and child care centers is tight—and where home-based programs already provide the bulk of child care. This is key, as so far 3K serves only about 5,000 kids in six school districts, but aspires to grow to over 19,000 kids in 12 school districts in the 2020-2021 school year. Some of these districts have severely overcrowded elementary schools.^{7 8}

⁷ The program is City-funded for an initial 12 districts and an anticipated enrollment of over 19,000. To serve all 32 of the city's school districts, the City is seeking federal or state funding. School districts where 3K has already been rolled out include: District 7 (South Bronx), District 23 (Brownsville), District 4 (East Harlem), District 5 (Harlem), District 16 (Bedford-Stuyvesant), District 27 (Broad Channel, Howard Beach, Ozone Park, Rockaways). School districts slated to have 3-K by 2020-2021 include: District 6 (Washington Heights and Inwood), District 9 (Grand Concourse, Highbridge, Morrisania), District 19 (East New York), District 31 (Staten Island), District 12 (Central Bronx), and District 29 (Cambria Heights, Hollis, Laurelton, Queens Village, Springfield Gardens, St. Albans).

⁸ NYC's Independent Budget Office. (April 2018). A Speedier Expansion of 3-K While Early Childhood Programs are Consolidated in the Education Department.

But working in the varied and geographically scattered world of family daycares will be a dramatic departure from the largest public school system's current Pre-K portfolio comprised primarily of schools and child care centers.

"It's a whole different ballgame," says Asneth Council, director of child care at the Police Athletic League, about family child care. "It's in a home. They aren't certified teachers."

"Family child care providers in other states have had the bad experience of being promised an opportunity to participate and being disappointed."

Known in the field as "group family daycare" or "family child care," the small, licensed businesses that will soon offer 3K run out of private homes, often with the owner running the business and working with low-paid assistants to care for small groups of neighborhood children of varying ages. Most are operated by women of color who receive modest wages paid by families either out-of-pocket or by using government

vouchers. Some also receive payment for children enrolled through EarlyLearn, the City-contracted child care system, which exists separately from the city's voucher system.⁹

Family daycares may appear from the outside to be mini-child care centers, with professionally printed signs on brownstones and clapboard houses displaying their names and phone numbers. But these programs, which provide the bulk of subsidized care of babies and toddlers in New York City, receive far less oversight than child care centers, and the caregivers' training is often minimal by comparison, focused primarily on issues of health and safety.

Their approaches to children and early childhood education vary. At some family daycares, toddlers and preschoolers watch a mind-numbing amount of TV. At others, caregivers energetically take on the responsibility of preparing kids for school. But even among these education-minded programs, notions of what getting ready for kindergarten entails can diverge widely, meaning anything from building with blocks to memorizing flash cards to requiring uniforms.

In theory, group family daycares have always been eligible to apply to become Pre-K or 3K providers. But in reality, few of these businesses have been able to compete with child care centers and schools. Only 21 Pre-K sites are in group family daycares, and they offer less than half a percent of the City's total Pre-K seats. That's because the City's typical contract requirements demand a level of organizational capacity that many family daycares simply don't have. They also hold family daycare programs to the same rules as Pre-K classes in child care centers, such as having a certified teacher on-site, which is far more difficult to meet in the smaller, home-based programs. Local advocates and providers say such requirements prevent many capable home-based programs from having a fair shot at becoming Pre-K programs. "They start at a humongous disadvantage," says Lehilany Labarca, executive director of Child Care Network of New York.

⁹ Vouchers are for families receiving public assistance (as mandated by federal law) as well as a small number of low-income families who do not qualify for public benefits. EarlyLearn programs are available to low-income working families who must earn no more than 275 percent, of the poverty line and either: 1) work 20 hours or more per week; 2) have a child receiving protective or preventive child welfare services; 3) attend an approved school or training program

That's about to change. In the DOE white paper released last month, the education department revealed its new plan to contract with family child care "network" organizations that will be tasked with working directly with the family child care homes. Such networks will relieve family daycares from needing to contract and negotiate directly with DOE, and are how the City currently works with family daycares in the contracted child care system. These networks not only perform an administrative role, they also coach and monitor sites and are associated with higher-quality care.¹⁰

The white paper does not detail rules and regulations that will be specific to home-based 3K providers that join networks, such as teacher requirements, or whether 3Ks in these programs can continue to serve children of various ages and, if so, what 3K will look like in these mixed-age classes. Nor does it say whether teachers in 3K family daycares will receive pay comparable to that of a teacher in an early education center.

Advocates and providers say that when fleshing out these details, DOE's challenge will be to lay out a vision for what 3K in family daycare looks like that is both inclusive of a significant number of home providers but also holds them to high standards and offers ample supports.

Currently, family daycares have few incentives to improve, points out Labarca of Child Care Network of New York, which works with over 1,200 home-based daycares. In many other states, family daycares receive a higher per-child subsidy for meeting quality benchmarks. But in the five boroughs, the retired neighbor helping out with the kids down the hall receives the same subsidized rate as a certified teacher who attends frequent trainings to stay current on best practices in early education.

Labarca is among those who believe that 3K should offer incentives for program improvement, including higher pay for gaining new credentials. This could help create a career pipeline for family child care workers, potentially growing the city's pool of experienced, certified teachers of color—something many in the early education world say is desperately needed.

"This is a magnificent opportunity if the rules could be modified to truly allow family child care to participate," says Labarca, who would like to see 3K teachers in family daycares enrolled in teacher certification programs while receiving intensive, on-site coaching from certified teachers.

Others in the field fear that DOE may not be selective enough, or will be unable to provide family daycares adequate supports. This could reinforce an already unequal system of child care, where children in under-resourced neighborhoods are too often taught by the least-qualified teachers.

"Bringing care to the standard [DOE] wants to have will be challenging in many of the home care sites," says Beverly Falk, director of graduate programs in early childhood education at the City College of New York and a faculty member at the City University of New York Graduate Center's school of education. "It's a really big challenge in a profession that hasn't been well-supported and that has very little infrastructure. And then the pay for people in early childhood [outside of DOE] is poverty wages, and all of these issues contribute to concerns about what will the actual care be for young children."

¹⁰ Bromer, J., Van Haitsma, M., Daley, K., & Modigliani, K. (2009). Staffed Support Networks and Quality in Family Child Care: Findings From the Family Child Care Network Impact Study. Chicago, IL: Local Initiatives Support Corporation; Hurley, K. (2016). Bringing It All Home: Problems and Possibilities Facing New York City's Family Child Care. Center for New York City Affairs at the New School, 41; Porter, T., Paulsell, D., Del Grosso, P., Avellar, S., Hass, R., & Vuong, L. (2010). A Review of the Literature on Home-based Child Care: Implications for Future Directions. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research.

Enlisting family child care for 3K without ample support could also set these small businesses up to fail. Between 2017 and 2018, about six percent of the City's Pre-K programs in community-based organizations closed, according to DOE. The reasons varied: some of the child care centers could not enroll enough children to be financially viable; others likely struggled to meet DOE's quality standards. But each of these centers invested resources and took financial risks to open a Pre-K class that ultimately closed.

Many of these centers were likely able to absorb the loss of a Pre-K class and stay open. But family daycares, which operate with far smaller budgets and can serve no more than 12 full-time children at a time, could be shuttered by such a loss, diminishing the City's limited supply of infant and toddler care in low-income neighborhoods.

There is no playbook for how to effectively include family daycare in a public preschool program. Few state and city preschool programs have done this well. "Family child care providers in other states have had the bad experience of being promised an opportunity to participate and being disappointed," Nancy Wyatt, president of the Family Child Care of the San Fernando Valley, told the Los Angeles Times in 2002.

Los Angeles County went on to become an exception to this. Starting in 2005, the county's targeted preschool program was one of the few to successfully include family daycares. (See "Lessons from L.A.," p. 13.) Doing so took a considerable financial investment—the program provided teachers with intensive on-site coaching for a full year before the program even opened, and a family daycare's funding increased with its ability to meet quality standards. A study of the program found that children experienced good academic outcomes across all preschool settings. But when a number of participating home programs decided to switch from serving kids of different ages to exclusively working with 4-year-olds enrolled through the Pre-K program, some neighborhoods experienced the unintended and severe consequence of losing precious child care space for babies and toddlers.

Bernadette Lombay, who runs the popular B-Happy Group Family Daycare in the Hunts Point neighborhood of the Bronx, is all too familiar with the unintended consequences of preschool expansion. In an area of New York where less than 40 percent of third graders are reading at grade level, Lombay says that for years kids have left her daycare so prepared for school that teachers at the local Kindergarten know they came from B-Happy. "They know how to sit. They know all the basics," she says. "I run it like a little school."

Before the City expanded Pre-K for 4-year-olds in 2014, almost all of B-Happy's children stayed with her from their toddler years until Kindergarten. But now, when the private-paying parents' kids turn 4, most reluctantly leave the program to enroll in the new, free Pre-K classes at the school down the block. "It's affecting my business and I have employees that depend on me," says Lombay.

Becoming a 3K provider would allow Lombay to hold onto 3-year-olds who likely would otherwise soon be diverted to new, free 3K programs. This would give her a better shot at staying open. But Lombay knows that whether that will be within her reach depends on what DOE decides to ask of home-based 3K providers. "I cannot imagine doing anything else other than this," she says, standing in what would have been her living room, but is instead filled with her neighbors' children. "I absolutely want to be part of 3K." §