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# Amid de Blasio's Pre-K Push, a Bid to Boost Learning at a Weak Point in the Pipeline

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Mildred Augustin has been providing day care from her home in the Bronx since 2002.

“Once I stayed home to take care of my kids, family members who had children said, ‘Why don’t you take care of our kids?’” Ms. Augustin, 49, said. “So I started doing it.”



Mildred Augustin working with several of the children for whom she cares in her Bronx home. Credit Emon Hassan for The New York Times

At first, the care she provided was more like babysitting or supervised play, with little time spent on learning.

“The kids would be well-fed, clean, not sick, not in pain,” she said. “We did the basics, like coloring and watching ‘Barney.’”

Similarly ad hoc arrangements are common across the city, particularly in low-income neighborhoods. Now, as the de Blasio administration moves forward with its ambitious plan to

expand prekindergarten classes, many experts in early childhood education believe more must be done to provide the young children who spend their days in such informal settings with a stronger foundation for structured learning.

Citing the large body of research pointing to the urgency of developing a child's brain in the first three to five years, these experts argue that formal instruction early on is especially important because there is evidence to suggest it can erase some of poverty's detrimental effects.

"It's not to say that the informal neighbor is any less nurturing; it can be a safe, loving environment," said Moria Cappio an early childhood expert at the Children's Aid Society. "But when you have a limited window in closing the achievement gap you need to entrust that to capable, licensed professionals. If you're having heart surgery you're going to a licensed cardiologist; you're not going to ask someone on your floor to cut you open."

In New York, those who care for three or more unrelated children must obtain a license to do so. In 2011, the most recent year for which data was available, there were 9,400 licensed in-home child care providers in the city. Those who care for fewer than three unrelated children do not need a license. Each year, according to the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation, of the Bronx, about 30,000 such exempt providers in the city qualify for state subsidies of roughly \$4,500 per child.

While they are subject to modest oversight — including, in some cases, random inspections — and must offer a safe and healthy environment, these providers need not deliver the kind of teaching that children's advocates say poor youngsters need to keep pace with their affluent peers. Some groups are moving to address the need for better early childhood education by helping home-based caregivers wend their way through the thicket of regulations and standards those who want to become city-licensed providers must navigate. The Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation, for one, recently received a \$770,000 grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to significantly increase the number of informal day care providers it trains with the licensing process in mind.

"In New York City, there is so much attention and momentum with the push toward universal pre-K," said Paula Sammons, a program officer with the Kellogg Foundation, based in Battle Creek, Mich. "Given that there is such a large informal care network, we really have to get to them and license them, so these kids are receiving the quality education and the nutrition they need. You start prepping them early so they're more ready for that transition."

And, Ms. Sammons said, the longer a child from a poor background goes without formal preparation for school — not just in terms of literacy and other cognitive skills, but also with social skills like being a good listener — the harder it becomes to make up the lost ground. "It's really difficult to catch up," she said. "You can't get that time back."

Shirley Goss, 48, cared for her five grandchildren in the Bronx as a legally exempt provider for eight years, until the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation encouraged her to obtain a license.

“It’s a major difference,” she said. “It’s the rules and everything, but I’ve learned a lot more. Going through the trainings and classes, I almost failed diaper changing. You think you know everything until you realize you could be doing something wrong. There is always a better way.”

Ms. Goss now cares for 13 children, offering a mix of schoolwork and play. “We’re prepping them for school,” she said. “We do schoolwork. They get homework. But they’re young; it’s a balance. We might play music with them or take them out and let them play in the water. If they’re hot and tired, they’re not going to pay attention.”

Ms. Augustin has also benefited from the increased emphasis on licensing. Though she got her license in 2004, she, like other providers, must work hard to maintain it. To make sure she does, and to do the best she can for the children for whom she cares, Ms. Augustin has continued taking training offered by the Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation.

“Eleven years I have pushed myself,” she said. “I used to cry, but my husband told me: ‘You can do it. Don’t give up.’ Now I can do it just like that. I feel so proud. I have a valedictorian. I have those recognized for academic achievement. It’s from my little home-based day care.”

Today, the brightly lit back room of Ms. Augustin’s two-story home in the Wakefield section of the Bronx is filled with colorful educational toys. Every day, she leads her five young charges through a targeted curriculum of activities designed to develop their motor, cognitive and social-interaction skills.

“Going to these classes we get to know about the brain, how it operates,” Ms. Augustin said, referring to her own training. “However the mayor wants the universal pre-K to be run, that’s what we are trying to give. We are right behind them with our age groups in our day care.”

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