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August 12th, 2026

Community Education Council District 4

**Statement on the Departure of Deputy Chancellor Simone C. Hawkins
and the Future of Early Childhood Education in New York City**

Dear Chancellor Kamar Samuels, Mayor Zohran Mamdani, and New York City Public Schools Leadership:

As parents, early childhood and public education advocates in Community School District 4, we write with both tremendous excitement about the future of universal childcare/early childhood education in New York City and concern about the announced departure of Deputy Chancellor Simone C. Hawkins from the Division of Early Childhood Education this September.

At perhaps no other moment in recent history has New York City had such an extraordinary opportunity to build a truly universal system of early childhood education and care. Governor Kathy Hochul and Mayor Mamdani have committed historic public resources to support families with their care needs at a time when everything is unaffordable. More than \$1.2 billion in state investment is supporting early childhood care and education in New York City, including the launch of free 2-K. The first 2,000 2-K seats to open this fall, the city has added another 2,000 3-K seats, and the administration has committed to expanding 2-K toward universality. Families in East Harlem are incredibly excited about his investment in our youngest learners.

The demand could not be clearer: more than 5,700 families applied for the first approximately 2,000 2-K seats.

For families in East Harlem and throughout New York City, universal childcare is not simply another education initiative, it is about equity and affordability. Most importantly, it is an opportunity to build a coherent educational continuum in which our youngest children are treated as learners deserving of

joyful, developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive, high-quality educational environments. District 4 parents have been long advocates for universal childcare and universal early childhood education for our children. We celebrate these historic investments, but we are clear that we also need the right leadership able to implement programming for some of our most vulnerable children.

Universal child care requires stable leadership, strong public institutions, trusted relationships with providers and educators, and genuine coordination between City Hall and New York City Public Schools. The timing of Deputy Chancellor Hawkins's departure is really concerning because this is when we need her leadership the most.

DC Hawkins' history with this work extends well beyond the two years she has served as Deputy Chancellor. Her early childhood experience in city government reaches back more than a decade. Beginning during the de Blasio administration, she worked in budget and operations during the historic expansion of universal Pre-K, when the city went from serving fewer than 20,000 children in full-day Pre-K in 2013-14 to nearly 69,000 just two years later. Over the eight years of the de Blasio administration, the city's early childhood initiatives ultimately served approximately half a million children and the work was celebrated nationally.

Her career since then has given her an unusually broad understanding of how this system actually works, and her reputation from colleagues and peers precedes her. DC Hawkins has served in city budgeting, nonprofit child care, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and New York City Public Schools. Before returning as Deputy Chancellor in July 2024, she had served in the Adams administration as Chief Executive of Early Childhood Operations and later as DOHMH's Chief Equity Officer and Deputy Commissioner for the Center for Health Equity and Community Wellness. Her roles included overseeing child-care programs and managing significant portions of the city's education budget portfolio.

Deputy Chancellor Hawkins understands early childhood education not only from the perspective of central administration, but as a former New York City public-school student, as a child-care provider, and as a parent who has enrolled her own child in an early childhood center as she has testified in public hearings. That combination of professional expertise and lived experience is extraordinarily difficult to replace.

It is also important to understand the condition of the Division of Early Childhood Education that Hawkins inherited when she returned in 2024.

During the previous leadership period, DECE underwent deeply destabilizing changes. Approximately 360 instructional coordinators and social workers were informed immediately before the 2022-23 school year that their positions were being excessed, setting off months of uncertainty and protest among the very professionals charged with supporting early childhood programs. Providers were simultaneously confronting serious payment delays, while restructuring and curriculum decisions generated significant concern among educators and community-based organizations. Even the UFT passed a vote of no confidence on then DC Kara Ahmed. There was no clear needs assessment nor comprehensive plan as to how this would improve the educational experiences of our youngest learners, just that providers felt disenfranchised and families in need were left without.

What we have witnessed under Deputy Chancellor Simone Hawkins has been a fundamentally different approach: one focused on rebuilding relationships, strengthening the division internally, listening to practitioners and providers, and creating greater coherence between early childhood and the rest of the divisions in the Department of Education. These were not abstract organizational disputes. DC Hawkins' ability to bring in the hundreds of instructional coordinators, social workers, education administrators, community-based providers and higher education scholars into the system as part of the infrastructure that makes universal early childhood education possible has been a Herculean task these last two years. She has helped bring together people whose expertise too often had been treated as separate and has restored an understanding that high-quality early education requires all of them.

DC Hawkins' leadership has also helped break down a longstanding problem within a system as large as NYCPS where most divisions were operating in silos. Early childhood cannot function as an educational island disconnected from special education, multilingual learners, curriculum and instruction, enrollment, family engagement, health, or other divisions responsible for supporting children as they move through our schools. The progress toward greater coherence is particularly important because early childhood education is education; not simply child supervision before kindergarten.

We have also watched Hawkins demonstrate an increasing willingness to hear educators when policies were not working as intended. Most recently, NYCPS relaxed a controversial early childhood curriculum mandate after educators raised concerns that it created unnecessary work and limited teachers' ability to respond to the children in front of them. This kind of responsiveness is essential if universal child care is going to be built with educators rather than imposed on the very people that are with our children 6-9 hours a day. DC Hawkins' leadership is what we need to ensure the growth and success of DECE.

Chalkbeat reported on July 31 that Deputy Chancellor Hawkins will leave NYCPS in September, just as New York City's first 2-K classrooms are opening. POLITICO's Madina Touré subsequently reported on concerns surrounding the timing of her departure as the city undertakes this enormous expansion. We share those concerns.

New York City is attempting to accomplish something extraordinary: building a universal early childhood system that ultimately reaches children beginning at age two and potentially younger, while strengthening 3-K and Pre-K, stabilizing community-based providers, addressing workforce needs, expanding seats where families actually need them, and creating a system responsive to working families.

This cannot become another initiative in which City Hall announces a vision and the Department of Education is left to figure out implementation afterward. Nor can NYCPS develop an educational structure without meaningful partnership with the administration responsible for financing and coordinating universal child care.

For families in District 4, this question is especially urgent. East Harlem families have lived through generations of inequitable access to educational resources. Universal child care gives us an opportunity to do something different, to begin public investment earlier, support families earlier, identify developmental and academic needs earlier, provide culturally responsive learning earlier, and make high-quality early education a public good rather than a privilege determined by a family's income.

DC Hawkins' departure is also significant because representation at the highest levels of NYCPS matters. Hawkins is a strong Black woman leading a division whose workforce and families overwhelmingly are women and communities of color. Moreover, she brings the combination that public systems desperately need: institutional knowledge, operational competence, lived experience as a public-school parent, deep familiarity with providers, an equity lens, and the ability to listen to educators and families.

The person who succeeds her *must* understand that DECE's greatest asset is not a program, curriculum, contract, or central-office initiative. It is the people who make the system work and the children we will open opportunities to..

We call upon Chancellor Samuels and Mayor Mamdani to ensure that the next Deputy Chancellor for Early Childhood Education is a leader of DC Hawkins' caliber and that the selection process actively involves the instructional coordinators, social workers, education administrators, community-based providers, early childhood educators, and parents who have made the division successful.

We also urge the administration to preserve the leadership structures, partnerships, and institutional knowledge that have been rebuilt during Hawkins' tenure rather than using this transition as an opportunity for another wholesale reorganization of DECE. Which last time was wholly disastrous.

This moment should be about continuity and transformation.

We have an opportunity to create the early childhood system New York City families have demanded for generations. The investments being made by the state and the Mamdani administration are worthy of celebration. But the measure of this initiative will not be how many seats we announce. It will be whether those seats offer children safe, joyful, developmentally appropriate, inclusive and genuinely excellent education - and whether the educators and providers caring for our youngest learners have the resources and respect necessary to do that work. DC Hawkins helped move New York City closer to that vision.

District 4 parents thank her for her leadership, her partnership, and the respect she has shown to educators, providers and families. As she prepares to leave NYCPS, we ask the Chancellor and Mayor to protect what has been built and to choose a successor capable of carrying that work forward in partnership with the people who made the Division of Early Childhood Education successful in the first place. Our youngest and “cutests” New Yorkers deserve nothing less.

In partnership and solidarity,

Community Education Council 4 - East Harlem/El Barrio

Kaliris Y. Salas-Ramirez, PhD
President
Community Education Council District 4

Lawanda Joyner
Recording Secretary
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D4 CEC Council members as follows:

Dr. Kaliris Salas-Ramirez, Sophie Oulai, Lacey Jordan, Lawanda Joyner, Vandana Bonilla, Elizabeth Soto-Cardona, Johanna Dominguez, Adriana Tlacomulco, Tia Jackson and Kiera Jerez Alston.

Motion by Kiera Jerez Alston seconded by Vandana Bonilla.

This Statement was approved unanimously by the council members at D4 CEC Calendar Meeting held on August 12th, 2026.