MEMORANDUM

To: Asya Howlette, Director, Office of Youth & Families

From: Jen Roberts, CEO

CC: New Orleans City Council

Date: August 5, 2024

Re: Annual Recap, 2023-2024 Millage-Funded City Seats Expansion Summary (CEA #K22-756)

This memo summarizes the progress and accomplishments of Agenda for Children and its partners in implementing the first full year of the NOEEN City Seats Program expansion with New Orleans Early Childhood Education millage funding under CEA #K22-756. Key accomplishments of the 2023-2024 program year are outlined below and described in greater detail in the attached July 2024 Progress Report. This progress report represents the last for the 2023-2024 program year.

Overview of the NOEEN City Seats Program

Agenda for Children, the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), and the City of New Orleans have partnered to provide free, high-quality early education seats to qualifying New Orleans families since 2018 through the NOEEN City Seats (City Seats) program. City Seats increases access to quality early childhood education for low-income New Orleans children ages six weeks through 3 years old, provides wraparound support for participating children and families to fully participate in early learning, and improves the quality of participating early learning programs. The program is operated by Agenda for Children, 40 early care and education centers across the City, and a cadre of high-quality wraparound support providers that provide various comprehensive services to participating children, families, and staff at centers. OPSB leads outreach to families and coordinates their enrollment and eligibility verification. The program is now funded by the early childhood education millage, which voters approved in April 2022, and leverages matching funds from the Louisiana Early Childhood Education Fund (ECEF).

Expanding Access to Early Care and Education Across the City

Over the past year, Agenda for Children leveraged City millage funds with state matching funds from the ECEF to expand the free seats available for children from low-income families. **The number of program seats available using City and State matching funding more than quadrupled** from last year to this year, rising from 400 to 1,672. City funding provided seats for 955 children, including 152 infants, 208 one-year-olds, 278 two-year-olds, and 317 three-year-olds. ECEF funding provided seats for 78 infants, 145 one-year-olds, 238 two-year-olds, and 336 three-year-olds. As of July 31, the City Seats program only had two vacancies (students who drop midyear are replaced by those on the waitlist). All participating children were New Orleans residents younger than age four as of September 30, 2023, and had family incomes of 200% or below the poverty level ($49,716 for a

family of three) for City-funded seats or less than 85% of the state median income for ECEF-funded seats ($59,592 for a family of three).

This expansion also enhanced family choice and increased the number of early learning centers participating in the program, which **nearly doubled from 22 early learning centers to 40 during this program year**. A map of participating early learning centers can be found here. Agenda for Children **leveraged state matching dollars** to serve more children, to help centers meet City Seats requirements, and to increase reimbursement rates for early learning centers to better cover the actual cost of care, particularly as they adjust to meeting City minimum wage requirements for all employees and meet the higher teacher-child ratios required to care for younger children. This year's expansion of City Seats required significant administrative effort as the program quadrupled. This was complicated because the Louisiana Department of Education changed its eligibility and verification requirements for all children enrolled with state-matching ECEF dollars *after* program enrollment had begun. As a result, Agenda for Children and its partners had to collect additional eligibility and verification information for all children in a matter of weeks last fall.

Providing Families with Wraparound Services and Support

Agenda for Children expanded the availability of comprehensive wraparound supports for families through numerous partnerships, including:

- **606 hearing screenings and 628 vision screenings** conducted by the Health & Education Alliance of Louisiana (HEAL) resulted in referrals to services for 30% or more of children enrolled in 12 City Seats programs.
- **Comprehensive pediatric health care services** for children in all participating City Seats programs through the Children's Hospital New Orleans ThriveKids program, which provides care coordination and a dedicated nurse, development specialist/early interventionist, social worker, speech-language pathologist, and access to a pediatrician. In May 2024, this partnership added a pilot cavity prevention program that has recently provided fluoride varnish for 159 children.
- **Ongoing child-focused mental health consultations** through Tulane Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (TIKES) through 582 visits and ten professional development trainings to 39 City Seats programs.
- **Coaching and training for parents and early childhood educators** focused on understanding and addressing trauma, establishing routines, promoting child self-regulation, and ensuring positive adult-child interactions.

Building Capacity for a Sustainable and Effective Local Early Learning System

The voter-approved Early Childhood Education millage sought not just to fund early learning seats for low-income families but also to build capacity for the local early learning system to expand access to high-quality early learning experiences for families over time. The CEA included provisions focused on facilities and workforce development, which were advanced through efforts to:

- **Address early childhood teacher compensation** to support great teachers and high-quality instruction by enforcing City minimum wage requirements with all partners, offering increased per-child funding rates with ECEF funds, and leveraging other City investments (CEA #K23-031) to provide wage supplements of up to $3,000 for 945 educators who remained at their sites throughout the year.
- **Recruit and train early educators** through:

    - A **recruitment campaign** that used the citywide New Orleans Teacher Job Board, a series of videos, and a landing page website to introduce people to the profession.
    - A **substitute pool program** launched in February and placed 26 "guest educators" in 13 City Seats programs to cover 330 days of instruction.
    - **Funding of eight Early Childhood Ancillary Certificate (ECAC) training providers** to provide 200 pre-educators with the training and support to enter the early learning teaching profession while working with high school and college/university partners to develop a dual enrollment program in local high schools.
    - The **New Leader Fellowship** provided peer-to-peer collaborative support for 10 aspiring or new early learning center operators to develop the skills they need for success.
    - **Free professional development to hundreds of early learning professionals**, including 140+ City Seats administrators and teachers and hundreds more educators across Orleans Parish.
- **Improve early learning facilities across the city to ensure safety and quality** by:
    - **Piloting a Facilities Expansion Fund and a Facilities Emergency Fund** that used $835,350 of private philanthropic funding to support a pilot facility expansion among 21 early learning providers, major emergency repairs to five facilities, and minor health and safety improvements to help 37 early learning programs meet licensing requirements.
    - **Designing a long-term Early Childhood Education Facility Grant Program** with the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority (NORA) that will launch this fall to provide $2M+ in funding for early learning facility development and improvement projects.
    - **Supporting nontraditional play spaces** that go beyond early learning centers to neighborhood spaces like TrainingGrounds' We PLAY Center and other local organizations that apply for a KidSpace Early Childhood Opportunity Fund (ECHO) Grant (the application cycle is open now) to develop innovative, safe, and accessible indoor and outdoor child-friendly spaces for diverse communities across the city.
    - **Providing City Planning expertise** through a new full-time Director of Facilities, who has extensive experience with the City of New Orleans and has already provided 650+ hours of technical assistance to help 50 early learning programs understand and navigate the regulatory process to open, expand, or renovate their facilities.
    - **Informing amendments to the City's Comprehensive Zoning Ordinance (CZO)** that make it quicker, easier, and more affordable for early learning providers to expand and/or open new centers. These changes were approved unanimously by the City Council in April 2024 and signed by the Mayor in June.
    - **Launching a formal process with a "Tiger Team" of cross-industry experts to identify a lead administrator for a Citywide Early Care and Education Facilities Fund**, which will be funded through the millage. The group developed a set of necessary competencies, experience and values, and ultimately selected the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority (NORA) to administer the Facilities Fund with $2.5M in seed funding from the millage. The Tiger Team transitioned to a formal working group, which has worked closely with the NORA team to develop an transparent and equitable application process that will ensure that selected projects

meet community needs and will be sustainable over the long term. The grant application process will open this fall.

Ensuring Effective and Efficient Program Administration and Evaluation

Agenda for Children staff have worked tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure effective and efficient **program administration** and the appropriate use of tax dollars through ongoing site monitoring, eligibility and attendance auditing, managing program waiting lists, health and safety monitoring, reporting to the City and State, ensuring compliance with the City's living wage ordinance, coordinating the payment of ~150 invoices each month, and more. In addition, Agenda for Children contracted with Child Trends, a national research organization with expertise in early education, to conduct the **annual program evaluation** that is available this fall. A separate contract with Tulane University's Early Childhood Research and Policy Lab will **evaluate the NOLA-PS enrollment system** and its impact on family access to early childhood education. Tulane University, Agenda for Children, and its partners in the Collaborative for Early Childhood Research (CECR) already issued seven briefs this year detailing families' experiences with the early care and education application process for all publicly funded programs (not just City Seats).

We sincerely appreciate the City's investments in early care and education and the City Council's oversight of this important program. The expansion of City Seats over the past program year may be the most significant expansion of early care and education in the city's history. It is truly a community effort, and Agenda for Children is honored to help facilitate and coordinate the many individuals and partners required to ensure its success.