School Starts Amid Tears, Excitement

First Stage for Mayor’s Pre-K Program

By Leslie Brody

For 4-year-old Jerry Egwu, starting full-day prekindergarten in Brooklyn on Thursday meant making new friends. For Michele Cortese, a flight instructor, the longer hours meant an easier juggle as a working mom. And for assistant teacher Farzaya Munna, the city’s preschool training meant a chance to pursue certification.

But for Mayor Bill de Blasio, Thursday marked the first stage of his vision of free prekindergarten for all city children.

“Full-day pre-K for every child is one of the most fundamental ways to shake the foundations of this school system and change it for the long term,” he said.

At the start of a hurried tour through a school in each borough on the official opening day, Mr. de Blasio said providing free full-day preschool to 53,000 children this fall, up from 20,000 last year, was “a dream we’ve had for a long time finally coming to fruition.”

His office said 61,500 children had registered for preschool so far. The mayor aims to boost the total to 73,000 next September.

Mr. de Blasio touted New York as a national leader, and advocates said that was the case when considering the pace and ambition of the rollout. But several states and cities launched extensive preschool programs much earlier, including Georgia, Oklahoma, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco.

Early-learning advocates applauded Thursday’s milestone for New York but cautioned that such speed brings the risk of compromising quality. Kris Perry, executive director of the First Five Years Fund, said the mayor achieved a “monumental feat” in adding access but “the quality question will take a longer time to answer.”

W. Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research, said it took New Jersey about five years to achieve consistency in care in its preschool program for children in poor cities.

For New York leaders, “It’s fair to celebrate succeeding at the first hurdle, especially given the number of doubters,” Mr. Barnett said. “But they still have to run the race.”

“I’m a smart girl,” said one young student unfazed by the hoopla.

The city received $300 million from the state to expand pre-K. At some 1,655 preschools in community centers and public schools, parents kissed children goodbye and wiped tears. Teachers, meanwhile, tried to attach faces to nametags and introduce newcomers to classroom habits.

“If you don’t have a routine, forget it,” said Nadine Holland, a director at Inner Force Tots preschool in Brooklyn.

The mayor said by late afternoon that the first day seemed to go smoothly. Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña echoed that view, adding, “There will always be a few people who wish they had gone to school X and got assigned to school Y. It takes about a week to iron all that out.”

New students approached the classroom as confidently as
Tears, Excitement As School Starts

Continued from page A15
4-year-old Abigail Eusebio at a community center called BronxWorks.

"I have too many friends," she boasted as her red patent leather Hello Kitty sandals gleamed. She wasn't fazed by all the hoopla. "I'm a smart girl," she said.

The mayor began the morning at Inner Force Tots, a community preschool that serves many children in shelters. He was joined by elected officials and United Federation of Teachers President Michael Mulgrew.

Ms. Fariña split off from the mayor's second stop to highlight her agenda beyond preschool.

At Marsh Avenue School for Expeditionary Learning in Staten Island, she emphasized the way the school nurtured the social and emotional growth of students in grades six through eight by putting them in small advisory groups led by a teacher who meets with them throughout middle school.

She also applauded their parent-teacher conferences led by students, and sophisticated use of technology.

In a music-appreciation class for eighth-graders, Ms. Fariña approached several students listening to a piece from the ballet "Swan Lake." Samantha Bravo, 13, seemed nervous as photographers surrounded her, their cameras clicking and lights flashing in her eyes.

The chancellor asked her softly about the music's tone.

"It's pretty calm," Samantha said.

The chancellor chuckled, saying, "This is the kind of music I need to be hearing today."

Ms. Fariña also went to Jour-ney Prep in the Bronx, an elementary school that she said "beat the odds" in academic achievement for its students' demographic. Most are poor and black or Hispanic.

The last stop for the chancellor and mayor was Amber Charter School in Manhattan, one of the city's few unionized charters. Mr. de Blasio pledged during his campaign to curb the growth of charter schools and on Thursday he reiterated his "special responsibility" to tend to the regular public schools enrolling 93% of students. He also promised to give charters an "open door and open hand."

—Sonja Sharp and Joe Jackson contributed to this article.