



The Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC)

Listening and Learning about Early Learning Family Engagement

May 4, 2010

The following comments are provided on behalf of the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC). DEC is a professional membership organization whose mission is to promote policies and advance evidence-based practices that support families and enhance the optimal development of young children who have or are at risk for developmental delays and disabilities.

We appreciate this opportunity to provide comments. DEC supports 1) individualized early childhood services and supports that intentionally honor the culture and languages of families receiving services; 2) assessments which involve families as partners in identifying child and family strengths, routines and environments to support learning; and 3) adequate investment in professional development to ensure implementation of evidence-based practices related to family engagement and research that contributes to the evidence base on effective family support.

As you know, DEC and our membership has had a long history of providing leadership, policy, and recommendations to the Congress and the Executive Branch on behalf of young children (Birth through 8 years) with disabilities and other special needs and their families. We applaud the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services for including the voice of disability throughout their Listening and Learning about Early Learning tour.

DEC requests consideration of the following comments as policies are developed and funding decisions made related to ensuring that **all** young children have the supports and evidence-based services necessary to be successful in quality early learning settings within their community.

I. For optimal development and learning of all children, individuals must respect and support the culture, values, and languages of each family and promote their active participation. Legislation and recommended practices call for individualized approaches to serving infants, toddlers, and young children with disabilities and their families. Individualized services begin with responsiveness to differences in race, ethnicity, culture, language, religion, education, income, family configuration, geographic location, ability, and other characteristics that contribute to human uniqueness (DEC 2004; DEC 2002; Donovan & Cross, 2002). DEC supports the notion that family centered practices ensure families receive individualized, meaningful, and relevant services responsive to their beliefs, values, customs, languages, and culture. DEC is committed to enhancing the quality of children's lives by promoting family well-being and participation in typical daily activities.

DEC recommends the following practice guidelines that provide a framework for enhancing children's and families' quality of life and responsive family centered practices (DEC, 2009):

1. Demonstrate our respect and concern for children, families, colleagues, and others with whom we work, honoring their beliefs, values, customs, languages, and culture.
2. Recognize and respect the dignity, diversity, and autonomy of the families and children we serve.
3. Advocate for equal access to high quality services and supports for all children and families to enhance their quality of lives.
4. Demonstrate our respect and appreciation for all families' beliefs, values, customs, languages, and culture relative to their nurturance and support of their children toward achieving meaningful and relevant priorities and outcomes families' desire for themselves and their children.
5. Provide services and supports to children and families in a fair and equitable manner while respecting families' culture, race, language, socioeconomic status, marital status, and sexual orientation.
6. Respect, values, promote, and encourage the active participation of ALL families by engaging families in meaningful ways in the assessment and intervention processes.
7. Empower families with information and resources so that they are informed consumers of services for their children.
8. Collaborate with families and colleagues in setting meaningful and relevant goals and priorities throughout the intervention process including the full disclosure of the nature, risk, and potential outcomes of any interventions.
9. Respect families' rights to choose or refuse early childhood special education or related services.
10. Be responsible for protecting the confidentiality of the children and families we serve by protecting all forms of verbal, written, and electronic communication.

II. Assessment involves shared experiences between families and professionals in which information and ideas are exchanged to benefit a child's growth and development. Family concerns, resources, and priorities are integral to the individualized process the team develops. The assessment process must be designed to facilitate family inclusion at multiple levels in response to family-identified preference and with sensitivity to family values, needs, language, and culture. The assessment process should involve the family and professionals working together to capture the child's way of learning about the world and the child's developmental status (Meisels & Fenichel, 1996). From this team advantage, members share information that will help to identify children needing additional assessment and services, enhance the quality of the child's individual service plan and education, and influence the child's daily activities and instruction. Ultimately, the assessment process should support the family's decision- making on behalf of their child (Pretor & McAllister, 1995). DEC supports the following assessment guidelines related to family engagement (DEC, 2007):

1. Assessment practices should be integrated and individualized in order to: (a) answer the questions posed by the assessment team (including family members); (b) integrate the child's everyday routines, interests, materials, caregivers, and play partners within the assessment process; and (c) develop a

system for shared partnerships with professionals and families for the communication and collection of ongoing information valuable for teaching and learning.

2. Assessments should be conducted within an ecological framework or model that accounts for each participant or aspect of the assessment process: the child, the family, the environment (home, community, and school/center), the instruments and tools, and the team members.
3. Within integrated child- and family centered assessment teams, family members are equal and contributing partners (Boone & Crais, 1999; Woods & McCormick, 2002). Family members provide critical and functional information to describe child status and level of functioning, identify concerns, and develop specific intervention goals. Teams must solicit the knowledge of family members to increase the richness of assessment information and engage families in the assessment process to understand and validate their concerns. Families contribute in the following ways: (a) they enhance team observations by describing their child's performance in other settings; (b) they suggest options, activities, and materials for interaction; (c) facilitate child engagement; and (d) interact with their child in play and care-giving routines. (Bailey, 2004; McCormick & Nellis, 2004).
4. Families support their child during the assessment process and also validate the findings suggested by other team members, identify discrepancies in performance, report on typical patterns of behavior, and co-assess with team members to ensure the best performance by their child. In addition, professional-family partnership in assessment provides opportunities for family members to identify their preferences for roles and acknowledges their expertise and competence as team members (Boone & Crais, 1999).
5. The assessment process must be designed to facilitate family inclusion at multiple levels in response to family preferences and with sensitivity to family values, needs, language, and culture. Additionally, in early childhood in particular, the assessment process is often a family's first experience with early intervention and the special education process. The outcome of the assessment process may have powerful significance for family members. It is therefore the responsibility of professional team members to ensure an honest and collaborative experience for family team members.
6. The role of the family as the child's first and most significant teacher is firmly acknowledged within the fields of early childhood, early intervention, and preschool special education. The assessment team benefits from the family's "teaching experience when they inquire about the child's preferences for activities, materials, play partners, and schedules" (Woods & McCormick, 2002. p.4).
7. Families and professionals initiate communication by sharing information about the child. This process is reciprocal. Family members share information related to the families' routines and history (e.g., medical records, photographs, videos, journals). Team members share information about the logistics of the assessment process (e.g., who to contact, participating team members, locations and times, roles for team members and the family), environmental characteristics and demands, available supports, adaptations, accommodations, and program options. The team's communication supports comfortable and confident family member participation. Information generated through the assessment process results in a sensitive discussion of findings and a formal report. The report reflects complete and clear, family-friendly, culturally responsive information.

III. DEC's research priorities for early intervention and early childhood special education promotes the identification and evaluation of the most effective models of family support and collaboration, and the

conditions under which these interventions are most effective. Early childhood is a distinct period in which children's learning and development is dependent on family relationships and environments that are embedded within a wide range of socio-cultural contexts. Specific areas of research include:

1. Determining where professional-family partnerships lead to enhanced capacity and other outcomes for children and families; and
2. Identifying which early education and intervention services, resources, and supports are most relevant and useful for families, and under what conditions. (DEC, 2006).

Once again, DEC appreciates the opportunity to comment. We offer our assistance as policies are developed to support ALL young children and their families. Leaders within our organization can offer you expertise across a variety of research and practice areas impacting very young children with diverse abilities and their families as well as feedback and input on policy as it is developed. For further information please contact:

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Public Comments for the Listening and Learning about Early Learning Tour U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

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Family Engagement

Thank you for taking the time to be here today and hear our thoughts and comments on the importance of family engagement in early learning. While I recognize that each of you is more eminently qualified to speak to this important topic, I appreciate the opportunity to do share my thoughts. My name is Phyllis Kalifeh and I am the President and CEO of the Children's Forum located in Tallahassee, FL.

The Children's Forum is a nonprofit organization operating in the State of Florida and beyond whose mission is to provide leadership, advocacy and professional development opportunities to achieve high quality, affordable early care and education for all children. Fundamental to achieving our mission is the availability of qualified early learning professionals who possess the knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs to effectively engage parents as partners, particularly in child caregiving environments outside the home to infuse a culture of family engagement.

There are many issues plaguing the field of early childhood but none are as important in my mind as the role of the teacher or caregiver who interacts with young children and their families on a daily basis. In Florida, more than 600,000 children attend some form of child care, prekindergarten or early learning program daily.¹ They are cared for and taught by teachers who likely have only a high school diploma or less (51%). Teachers with some college represent approximately 27%, 9% actually possess an associate degree and 13% possess a bachelors degree or higher.² In addition to the educational challenges of the early learning workforce, approximately 3.5 out of 10 will leave their jobs within the first year of employment.³ Turnover is high and exceeds that of those working in the public education sector considerably. These facts are important as we know that young children from birth to five are the most vulnerable and are building the critical foundations necessary for success in school and life.

Continuity of care and stable relationships with adults are critical for both families and their children. Imagine for a moment that you're the parent of a new baby and you have six weeks of leave before you

¹ Children's Forum, Inc. (2008), Estimates on children in child care in Florida. Tallahassee, FL.

² Herzenberger, S., Price, M. & Bradley, D. (2005) Losing ground in early childhood education: Declining workforce qualifications in an expanding industry. Research report by the Keystone Research Center, Harrisburg, PA.

³ Whitebook, M., & Sakai, L. (2003). Turnover begets turnover: An examination of job and occupational instability among child car center staff. Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 18, 273-293.

must return to your job. If you choose a child care center, you will likely have a different teacher in the morning when you drop off your baby than you do when you pick him up in the afternoon. Then there's 30 - 40% chance that the teachers you have met and formed relationships with will be gone before the end of the baby's first year and thereafter. Then as your baby becomes a toddler, he will likely change classes and have new teachers, different in the morning and afternoon. By the time a child reaches kindergarten age, parents and their young children will probably have had 10-15 different adults if the workforce is relatively stable. Trust and relationship building are critical for both the children and their parents during the early learning years. The early childhood teacher or caregiver is the lynchpin to establishing healthy relationships for successful family partnerships on behalf of the child. If these are the facts, what can we then do about them?

In the spirit of full disclosure, the Children's Forum is also the administrative home for the Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) Early Childhood® Scholarship program, a role we have maintained for the past 14 years. The mission of T.E.A.C.H. is to provide opportunities for those who work in child care and preschool programs, whether school-based, center-based or family child care homes to increase their knowledge and skills in working with young children including training in family engagement through informal and formal educational pathways. More than a scholarship, the creator of the program, Sue Russell, keenly understood the nuances of the early learning workforce. The program incorporates a three-way partnership between the sponsor (typically the owner or director of the program), the teacher and the T.E.A.C.H. program addressing the issues of education, compensation and retention - issues that have challenged the early learning field.

The sponsoring center agrees to provide paid release time for the teacher for three hours each week so that he/she can study and manage multiple roles. The sponsor further agrees to assume a portion of the costs for their teacher(s) and to provide a raise or bonus upon completion of their contract. The teacher agrees to pay their portion of books and tuition and attend classes to work towards credentials and degrees in early childhood or child development and agrees to remain employed at the sponsoring center for one year beyond the completion of the contract. Finally, the T.E.A.C.H. program pays a majority of the tuition and books and provides a bonus upon completion to recognize and reward their achievement.

The T.E.A.C.H. program operates in more than 20 states nationwide. The data clearly confirm the progress of the field for those who have been fortunate to participate. Last year, national T.E.A.C.H. data show that 78% of the states reported increases in compensation of 5% or more and all states reported compensation increases- an important fact considering the economic climate in our country. More than 21,000 scholarships were awarded and 125,820 credit hours were completed. The program has been successful in retaining those participating in the program with 61% of the states reporting turnover of 5% or less (as compared with 35% - 40% nationally) and all remaining states reported 11% or less. The program is addressing that critical need for stability and continuity of care for young children and their families.⁴

Diversity in the child's caregiving environment is also an important consideration. The early childhood workforce should be culturally and linguistically competent and represent the audiences it serves. The T.E.A.C.H. program also recognizes the need for a diverse workforce and states are challenged to develop plans to recruit underserved populations. 42% of the recipients last year were people of color and 10%

⁴ T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood & Child Care WAGE\$ National Annual Program Report (2008 - 2009): Creating Systems of Support for the Early Childhood Workforce, Child Care Services Association, Chapel Hill, N.C.

were Latina. Family engagement strategies must be respectful of the culture and diversity of families it serves.

The T.E.A.C.H. program is evidence based and has a history of successful outcomes for those who work in early childhood. This year we celebrate 20 years since the creation of T.E.A.C.H. While states are successful once they have the resources and are able to fully implement the program, a national strategy and focus on the professional development of the workforce is critical to achieve our early learning goals. Children deserve a competent, fairly compensated, and stable early childhood workforce and families deserve the opportunity to be partners with committed professionals working in tandem to achieve the best outcomes for their children.

If we truly believe in family engagement, we must support the early childhood workforce. I urge you to ensure that America's agenda for young children and early learning recognize the importance and focus on the professional development of the early childhood workforce and expansion of proven models such as T.E.A.C.H. that can produce the results we want and need for our children and their families. We know what works but we need the political will to achieve the best results for our nation's children.

I sincerely thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

Good afternoon. My name is Laura McComas and I am representing the National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education and Families, a Washington DC-based organization that works to help municipal leaders take positive action on behalf of the children, youth and families in their communities. I want to thank you for the opportunity to learn alongside you at this valuable meeting, and for the opportunity to share with you a bit about the local level perspective on early learning and family engagement.

As all of you certainly know, research shows that parents and caregivers are key ingredients to a child's healthy development and educational success, from the early years throughout their academic careers. When families are informed and involved in their child's care and education, we see a variety of positive benefits, from better transitions to kindergarten and between grades, to higher graduation rates, to more positive attitudes about school and learning, to say nothing of the broader benefits that extend to the community as a whole.

The National League of Cities, through its Institute for Youth, Education and Families, has had the privilege of assisting a diverse number of cities in implementing family engagement strategies that are truly making a difference in the lives of children. Through our work in the early childhood and K-12 fields, we have seen that local elected officials and city staff can and do play a critical role in supporting family involvement in children's educational development from birth through third grade, and beyond.

The mayor of this city, in fact, Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer, has been a strong advocate for early childhood issues since the beginning of his tenure as mayor in 2003, when he established the Mayor's Prek Initiative. He has continued to leverage a variety of resources and partnerships to not only expand access to pre-k, but also to expand access to comprehensive, connected early childhood services, including family engagement programming. This comes primarily through initiatives like the city-led Parramore Kids Zone, which is a, place-based program modeled after the Harlem Children's Zone.

Other cities across the country are also leading the way in innovative, effective programming and policies to promote family engagement as part of a birth through eight agenda. The city of Boston developed Countdown to Kindergarten Boston, an initiative that engages families, educators, and community members in a city-wide effort to support children and families as they transition into kindergarten. Led by the mayor and superintendent, the city of San Jose recently launched the SJ2020 initiative to close the community's academic achievement gap by the next decade. The initiative has a strong birth-through third grade focus, and includes parent engagement efforts as part of its strategic plan. In Richmond, Virginia the public school district is a partner of the city-operated Richmond Home Visiting Referral Center, in which teachers and public school staff can refer families to be connected with one of the five intensive home visiting and parent engagement programs serving the city.

Efforts like this happening at the local level can play a vital role in informing both current and future programming and policy around early learning and family engagement. The best practices that emerge from city work can help create "bottom up" designs that are scalable, effective, and tailored to a variety of unique community needs.

City leaders are also uniquely positioned to spearhead or support community initiatives that strengthen young children and their families. They make spending and policy decisions at the local level, can use their "bully pulpit" to raise public awareness and support for issues, and have the leverage needed to convene diverse stakeholders across the birth to eight spectrum. To ensure that policies and programs are making the greatest

impact, it is important to consider ways to support the vital role that cities and local level leadership play in addressing the issue of early learning and family engagement.

Because parents and caregivers are one of the most important contributors to a child's educational success, it is key to understand the who, what, where, when and how of effective family engagement policies and programs. On behalf of the National League of Cities, I commend and thank you for convening this forum of expert thought leaders and practitioners in this field and encourage you to remember the important role cities play as you move forward with this work.

**Talking Points for
Listening and Learning about Early Learning Tour
Family Engagement
Tuesday, May 4, 2010
Orlando**

- **The Association of Early Learning Coalitions (AELC)** is an organization established and operated by the Executive Directors of the 31 Early Learning Coalitions in Florida. Our mission is to share our best practices, strengthen our management systems, and advise the Agency for Workforce Innovation (AWI) regarding early learning issues and policies from a local perspective.
- The AELC represents a structure for advancement of local priorities and local decision-making and a commitment to partnerships with other organizations, agencies, and individuals to ensure that Florida is a great place for young children and their families.
- Florida's Early Learning Coalitions (ELC) seek to assist young children and their families by providing opportunities to enhance children's chances for educational success. Early Learning Coalitions, governed by two landmark pieces of legislation, are each designed to assist families in being able to work and better prepare their young children to enter school "ready to learn" and for success in life.
- In addition to providing early care and education opportunities for children and supporting early learning providers in enhancing the quality of their settings, Early Learning Coalitions offer a variety of family engagement opportunities. Some examples include:
 - The *ELC of the Big Bend and the ELC of Flagler-Volusia* has embraced the Whole Child philosophy, an approach using strategic planning, web-based technology, performance measurement, and broad-based community engagement to build collaborative networks between service providers and link families to needed services. Families are provided comprehensive services that address the needs of the whole family, including health and developmental screenings for their child, onsite child development information and consultations, and referrals for services such as food, clothing, and shelter. Follow up is conducted with families to ensure needs are being met by the community.
 - The *ELC of Putnam-St. Johns* has established a *TRACK Team* in Putnam County that provides transitional services to pregnant women and their newborns as they move from agency to agency for various services.
 - The *ELC of Alachua* has implemented a new male involvement program called "24/7 Dad's." There have been approximately 300 dads that have been introduced to the curriculum. The Coalition's Home Visitation Department partnered with Santa Fe Community College to introduce the Parents as Teachers Curriculum to their Adult Literacy/GED Class. The Home Visitation Department also works with Lofton Professional Academy High School, meeting with teen parents and their babies once a week. Topics of training and discussion include bonding, health and nutrition, listening skills, hand and eye coordination, respect and love for books, and helping children learn.

- The *ELC of Manatee*, in partnership with the Family Partnership Center, provided a Parent Partner Program. Over 35 home visits of 60 to 90 minutes each were provided to 17 families with 100% of parents participating in 5 or more visits reporting increased knowledge and skills in target areas (e.g., brain development, limit-setting, literacy skills).
- In collaboration with the school district, the *ELC of St. Lucie* sponsored a free workshop available to all families in the community entitled “Easy to Love and Hard to Discipline.” Approximately 50 families attended this six-week session, held at a local public school with child care available on site. The Coalition also partners with the Children’s Services Council of St. Lucie to deliver the Father/Child Connection Program, designed to empower fathers to spend more quality time with their children through activities and mentoring.
- The *ELC of the Big Bend Region* has created an early literacy program called My First Books to promote families reading together. The community has responded by donating over 13,000 new and gently used books. Local community members have donated over \$14,000 to build Word Garden Children’s Libraries in each of the Coalition’s seven Family Service Centers. This is a giving library not a lending library where children choose an age appropriate book and take it home for their home library. This family literacy effort encourages families to read together and help young children prepare for success in school and in life.
- The *ELC of Orange*, in partnership with the City of Orlando, is conducting an intensive project to improve the quality of the environments of targeted child care centers. Parramore Tots, the partnership between the City of Orlando and the *ELC of Orange*, targets child care facilities serving children living in the Parramore neighborhood. This long-term project includes group trainings on parent involvement, center assessments, health and safety training and technical assistance, and observation and portfolio development. Additionally, needs assessments and consultations are conducted at all participating centers and resources such as curriculum, choking hazard gauges, parent newsletters, and facility marketing tools are provided. The Community Foundation of Central Florida, the Jacob G. Schmidlapp Trusts, and Fifth Third Bank funds the Parramore Tots Program.
- The *ELC of Escambia* has developed a VPK Calendar that is distributed to the families and teachers of VPK children. It contains information on the VPK Education Standards and provides monthly parent-child activities supporting all learning domains. The Calendar has been adopted by other Coalitions around the state.
- The *ELC of Pasco and Hernando* has implemented Jump Start to Early Learning. The community event includes games, arts and crafts, make and takes, face painting, and school supply giveaways. Supported by **Target** and **Kohls**, the Coalition distributed nearly 500 brightly colored backpacks filled with school supplies for preschool children (such as crayons, markers, books, baby blankets, and baby wipes) at three separate events.

Important Considerations

- There are many families on waiting lists for school readiness services; additional funding is required to support family work and educational success for children.
- Families need assistance in identifying quality early learning programs; child care resource and referral services, quality rating improvement systems, and family support programs play a vital role in helping educate families.
- Federal support for quality of early learning programs is crucial; this includes establishment of high quality standards as well as incentives and supports to meet those standards.

JENNIFER PARK
(Public Speaker)

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- The Office of Early Learning has a team of experts who lead professional networks and implement quality initiatives statewide to ensure continuous improvement of the system.
- In Florida, School Readiness and Voluntary Prekindergarten programs are administered at the state but delivered locally by 31 coalitions which are non-profit organizations. Members of the networks are staff from early learning coalitions.
- The vision of these networks is to create an active community of professionals that support one another. Each network focuses on one of 6 specific areas of service including:
 - Child Care Resource & Referral
 - Infant/Toddler
 - Inclusion
 - Preschool Services
 - Afterschool Services
 - Family Development Services
- The Network coordinators hold monthly calls and webinars to focus specifically on an area of technical assistance or to deliver targeted training. Members participate in these opportunities for sharing best practices, engaging providers and families in CCR&R, and improving the quality of care within early learning programs. These opportunities deliver hands-on training and resources for staff who work with families and providers.
- The newest network, the Family Development Network, focuses on supporting a family-centered approach to all state level policy initiatives. This network is still in the planning stages. One of the first goals of this network is to help families understand and become more actively engaged their child's development in the context of every day learning moments.
- In the future, this network will develop additional tools to help R&R and SR eligibility staff work more effectively with families in crisis. With a continual focus on family strengthening and high quality care, this network is the cornerstone of improving family engagement through effective R&R approaches.
- We know from research that family involvement benefits parents, teachers and children. We also know that parents are children's first and most important teachers. OEL is making a committed effort to ensure that this important aspect of a child's development is clearly defined and that staff are available to assist coalitions in their efforts locally to involve families and parents.