



March 26, 2010

Dear Representatives Miller, Kline, Kildee and Castle:

We are delighted to write today on behalf of the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education – the countrywide organization for state education agency staff members with major responsibilities in the field of early childhood education, from infancy through the primary grades. We thank you for seeking our views in this process and we are pleased to share with you the key principles and recommendations that guide our efforts on behalf of the Nation’s youngest learners.

We were eager to take a detailed look at the Administration’s newly released “Blueprint” for the reauthorization as the process gains momentum toward enactment of the law. We were surprised that the importance of the earliest years of the learning continuum supported by the Administration to date was not as clearly reflected in the Blueprint. Research shows us that learning progresses on a continuum beginning at birth, and that later learning is optimized when *built* on this foundational progression. The scope and sequence of education starts early and “pays forward,” not the reverse. In fact, the ultimate goal of the Blueprint – the assurance that all students will be college or career ready by high school graduation – cannot be realized without a firm foundation in the early years.

We also know that learning is multi-dimensional at all levels of the continuum. Birth to age eight is a critical period where the physical, social and emotional domains, along with a child’s approaches to learning, are vital and integral to their successful cognitive development. That said, a “whole child” approach – an intentional, developmental, and continued focus on these multiple domains of learning – is as foundational to success in high school as it is in preschool. AND, this is true across all academic content areas and for all children, including those with disabilities and those learning English.

With these principles in mind, we recommend a NEW Early, Elementary and Secondary Education Act (EESEA) with a discrete title for early learning from birth through third grade—call it the FIRST TITLE, if you will—that begins and integrates with all other titles of the act. As the next step in building a comprehensive birth through age eight system of early childhood development services, the ESEA presents an important opportunity to tighten the focus on early learning. We support incorporating the Early Learning Challenge Fund (ELCF) within this authorization consistent with this vision for a First Title. To complement and support the objectives of the Challenge Fund, we recommend the following:

- Include provisions for states to require school districts to initiate a strategic planning process to improve foundational knowledge, skills, and dispositions for future school success—for traditionally disadvantaged and for all students by addressing the areas of teacher quality, curriculum implementation, and comprehensive services, such as health and family involvement in programs serving children birth through age eight.
- Establish and fund a program (from existing or new resources) to support formal partnerships with school districts and early childhood programs, including standards defining early childhood outcomes, teacher and classroom quality, curriculum, and assessment for the provision of high quality early childhood services.
- Add incentives for school districts to integrate and braid the spectrum of current ESEA and IDEA dollars for early learning, including and highlighting the benefits of collaboration with community early childhood partners.
- Create a central mechanism in the US Department of Education for the provision of technical assistance, professional development and capacity building for the managers and directors of state early childhood education systems.

Teachers are paramount. Those who care for and teach young children require and deserve access to practical, evidence-based, age appropriate pre-service and ongoing professional development. And they are due wage and benefit parity with similarly credentialed positions in the later years of schooling.

- Require and provide funding for the inclusion of early childhood educators in school district professional development systems as appropriate.
- Support principal preparation and development programs to assure school leaders are familiar with the constructs of high quality early childhood education and equipped to support early learning opportunities and environments.

Early childhood should be part of strategic planning to turn around persistently failing schools. Well-designed and implemented early childhood programs improve the odds for children's school success.

- To meet the objective of turning around the lowest performing schools, require local school districts to strategically align high quality early education services in school attendance areas of high poverty and/or with school improvement needs.
- Require districts to incorporate a thorough scan of their "feeder systems" and provide incentives for districts to include comprehensive early childhood programming and services in school improvement planning for elementary, middle and high schools.

Transitions are *always* important, and they are *particularly* important for younger learners. Effective transition should focus on: building and sustaining relationships (children to teachers, families to personnel at the leaving and entering of programs); sustaining developmental continuity in program and classroom practices (including transferring information about the developmental and learning status of the child); and lastly, addressing the procedural issues of multiple programs in the service of individual children.

- Require intentional, research-based transition practices among the programs serving children throughout the day, throughout the year, and along the learning continuum from birth to the end of third grade.

Rethink and reconstruct the mechanics of current compliance provisions of the ESEA to allow flexibility to meet the intentions of these recommendations, harmonizing regulations to facilitate merging of resources at the local level. This is consistent with many of the principles noted above, such as those for transition. Good practice is hindered if the various funding streams have conflicting, overlapping or additive regulations, including those for supplement/ not supplant and maintenance of effort.

These principles and recommendations also provide some explicit cautions for the reauthorization. Chief among our concerns is the application of assessments to the years before third grade, particularly for high stakes purposes. We urge you to pay close attention to the prolific study presented to the Congress and to the Department by the National Academies,¹ and request you resource ongoing research and development focused on appropriate measures and uses of information for the cohort of children in these early years.

We urge that the entire continuum from “cradle to career” be afforded your “undivided” attention during this reauthorization. Discrete laws, and their resulting offices, titles, and programs often result in the disjointed, segregation of services to children. We know this can be counter productive to the comprehensive nature of learning at all ages, and especially to the systemic character of early childhood development and learning and the continuity alluded to in our key principles. We do believe, with care, a law can be crafted to support a cohesive and comprehensive education system that spans the learning continuum.

We stand ready to link arms in this next step in this process. Please do not hesitate to engage us going forward.

Respectfully submitted by,

The National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education
Information@naecs-sde.org

¹ NAS Report – Early Childhood Assessment: Why, What, and How – www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12446