



## *National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education*

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 commend the Administration for “listening” to our views and others in this process and we are pleased to share with you key principles and recommendations that guide our all of our efforts on behalf of the Nation’s youngest learners. Many these views have been expressed in previous recommendations to the administration. All may be found on our website at: [www.naecs-sde.org/policy](http://www.naecs-sde.org/policy)

### **THE OVERALL PICTURE – UNDERSTANDING P-3 STRUCTURES**

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 Administration’s efforts focused on education overall – the aim 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 through 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. This is true across all academic content areas and for all children. We also know that children with disabilities and those learning English are equally served by a cohesive, comprehensive and connected early childhood system, but they have unique and specific needs that should be addressed within that system.

We know that 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 providers, teachers and principals. Transitions should provide connections, continuity and consistency for children and families as they are entering and leaving services, programs and schools. There should be sustained developmental continuity in program and classroom practices. This continuity is both founded and served by effective transferring information about the developmental and learning status of the child.

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. To assure an effective and cohesive learning spectrum from birth through age eight, the administration is urged to address the procedural issues of multiple programs in the service of individual children. This requires intentional, research-based transition practices among the programs serving children throughout the day, throughout the year, and along the learning continuum.

During times of limited resources, we must not fail to do the right thing because it might divert resources from “the other right thing.” An expanded role for early childhood education in the US Department of Education should and will complement the array of programs and services at the Department of Health and Human Services. States are modeling that this can work and the Early Childhood Study Groups, along with the collaborative efforts in the US Departments of Education and Health and Human Services are evidence that the path has been laid for successful collaboration at the federal level.

As the next step in building a comprehensive birth through age eight system of early childhood development services, we believe that the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (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. A birth through age eight approach within the ESEA reauthorization provides a fresh prospect to support and fund formal partnerships with school districts and early childhood programs. Incenting the alignment of high quality early education services in school attendance areas of high poverty and/or with school improvement needs is of particular importance.

## **Preparation and Development of the Profession**

We know that teachers are paramount to the P-3 system—the quality of child experience and learning is directly linked to the professional in the classroom, and this is true regardless of auspice. Those who care for and teach young children require and deserve access to practical, evidence-based, age appropriate pre-service and ongoing professional development.

Effective preparation and development programs should be of sufficient intensity and should be content rich, focused and sustained over time. Research has shown that sequenced training targeted to specific practices leads to improvement in those practices, and that both child development and curricular content are important. Professional development is more likely to improve teaching and learning when it focuses on content-specific knowledge and practices.

Preparation and development programs should provide a pathway of professional progress along a continuum that results in increased knowledge, skills, and qualifications and commensurate compensation for the practitioners. A skilled, knowledgeable and competent professional is essential to the success of child development and learning and our early childhood professionals are due parity with similarly credentialed positions in the later years of schooling.

School leaders – principals in elementary and early childhood program directors – are also essential to successful early learning. Their preparation and development opportunities should

assure they are knowledgeable in child development and the attributes of high quality, age appropriate environments, and the content and practices that contribute to child outcomes along the birth-through-age-eight continuum.

Sustained, focused and content rich early childhood professional development for teachers and school leaders requires sufficient resources – both dedicated time and funding – in addition to the financial supports needed to assure the commensurate increases in compensation due competent, skilled professionals. Where appropriate, the federal government should support advancing the early childhood professional development. In addition, early childhood systems should require and provide funding for the inclusion of early childhood educators in school district professional development systems, as appropriate.

State early childhood administrators are also essential to a successful system of early learning, and could benefit from targeted training and professional development – we recommend a central mechanism in the US Department of Education for the provision of technical assistance, professional development and capacity building for the managers/directors of state early childhood education systems

## **Family Engagement**

Families are not only the first and most important phalanx in a child’s healthy development, but they are essential allies with educators in assuring success along the learning continuum. It is also important to recognize and cherish the rich diversity represented in the families with young children. Parents should be engaged, enabled, and empowered to optimize their children’s health, learning and development from birth through college and career.

An important goal for family education is to increase knowledge about how adult actions affect child development and to empower parents and family members with the skills they need to support their child’s growth and learning. Early childhood professionals should be trained in effective communication skills in order to convey key information to parents about their child’s progress and learning. They should also be knowledgeable about adult learning in order to optimize this partnership with families.

## **Standards and Assessments**

In our joint statement with NAEYC, in response to the release of the draft common core standard for K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade, we “affirmed that a standards-challenging and achievable, appropriate to children’s development, and addressing each area of children’s inter-related development and learning – are an important component of teaching and learning success for every child, and that standards can be a valuable part of a comprehensive, high quality system of service for young children.” A comprehensive, cohesive, and coordinated system of standards must align objectives and principles for child outcomes and expectations, but also for the programs serving young children and the professionals that serve those programs.

We urge you to pay close attention to the prolific study presented to the Congress and to the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services by the National Academies on early childhood assessment and the collection of information about young learners. We suggest that data collected to show school success and school improvement be expanded to include more than

just school or learning outcomes. Of equal importance is data on community resources, teacher practices, home practices (parent education and engagement) and other systems measures. With this information, professionals and programs can have a more complete picture of a child's complete learning environment and use this information for important decision-making.

The purpose of a well-designed, integrated and cohesive information system for early childhood connects standards, assessment and the consequent data to:

- Teachers—so they can adjust and improve their practice to meet the specific learning needs of their students
- Parents—so they know how their children are doing and what to do at home to support their children's learning and development, and
- Programs and the system overall—so decision-makers can determine the adjustments and improvements needed to improve child development and learning.

## **PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER**

Our joint statement with NAEYC also highlighted that significant work remains to be done even with the best-written and most comprehensive standards. The four topics on the listening tour are interrelated and connected. There is still an urgent need for the development of appropriate and comprehensive curricula and assessments. Professional development is needed for teachers and administrators in effective practice. Resources are essential to ensure that all children have opportunities to meet challenging and achievable expectations for learning. The NAECS-SDE stands ready to partner with you in this endeavor and we are confident that together we can assure a system that serves our youngest learners.