



Oral Testimony of
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February 5, 2014
United States House of Representatives
Committee on Education and the Workforce Hearing

“A State Perspective on
Improving Early Education and Care Systems and Services for
Our Children and Families”

Good morning. I am Harriet Dichter, Executive Director, Delaware Office of Early Learning.

Chairman Kline, Ranking Member Miller, I would like to begin by saying thank you. Congress recognized the economic and educational payoff of early education and care in the Omnibus Appropriations bill for 2014. You restored sequester cuts to Head Start and child care, and added more than \$900 million to serve additional children and establish another opportunity for states to expand preschool. I thank you for these advances, as well as for dedicating a hearing to early childhood development as you plan for the next phase of federal leadership and investment.

Research confirms what parents and grandparents have always known instinctively: the first years of life set the stage for all aspects of development and learning. This makes the quality of early childhood programs essential to good life-long outcomes.

Delaware's young children and their families are fortunate to be supported by the commitment of Governor Markell and our state legislators. Governor Markell created the Delaware Office of Early Learning to assure a strong, integrated federal-state-community effort for young children and their families. To support this work, we count over 100 partners, including school superintendents, principals, and teachers; child care and Head Start programs; foundations, universities, and business leaders; health and behavioral health providers; museums and libraries; and our families. That's a lot for a small state!

Delaware's state investment in early learning increased by one-third in the 2011 legislative session, and has been further improved through our participation in the federal Early Learning Challenge. We improved payment rates for our child care providers and funded a state-wide framework for early learning, known as Delaware Stars, that allows us to work with all of our early learning programs, including child care, Head Start, schools, Early Intervention, etc. to focus on quality improvement.

Across the country, Republican and Democratic governors recognize the value of early education. In 2013, of the 40 states that provide state resources for preschool, 30 increased budgets by a total of nearly \$370 million. States are committed to this work, but we can't do it alone. Partnership with the federal government to improve outcomes for young children is essential.

I would like to use my remaining time to make two main points:

1) **First, there is no one silver bullet, no one size fits all answer. What does matter for outcomes, for every child and every family, is quality.** In other words, States want the flexibility to structure programs to best meet our needs, but establishing and growing a high-quality foundation is absolutely critical to success.

To meet the needs of children and families, we must provide a range of options (such as full time AND part time education and care, night and weekend hours, speech and language

development, and special needs care). We can and should expect to make investments in programs, such as child care, pre-kindergarten and Head Start, and we should expect to invest in infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

But what do I mean when I emphasize “quality” early learning? A quality program works in partnership with families to develop our children’s skills and abilities, not just in key areas of language, literacy and general cognition, but also social and emotional skills. This is the fuel for life-long success—initiative, grit, persistence, resilience—that together with traditional academic areas help pave the way to productive adulthood. Quality early learning is part of our equation for our children’s school and life success. That’s why we have so many partners and stakeholders in our efforts in Delaware.

Despite scattered criticism of individual program evaluations or programs, we know quality early learning programs work. Decades of scientific studies conducted by well-respected institutions and researchers show that children—and our communities-- benefit in many ways – better education, higher earnings, lower crime, resulting in greater public savings in the short and long term. The question is not whether we know enough to proceed, but instead, how to expand upon the proven successes of high quality programs, including continuing to look for ways to improve our work and our outcomes.

2. Second, the federal government has not been sufficiently proactive in this area, leaving too much to the states to do, notably on funding and financing.

As I mentioned earlier, Delaware and other states across the country have been making new investments in early learning– but the gap between unmet need and available resources remains vast. We can’t do it by ourselves. Our two major funding streams, the Child Care and Development Block Grant and Head Start, are unquestionably insufficient. Head Start serves 40% of eligible four year olds, and only 3% of eligible infants and toddlers. Only one in six children eligible for child care assistance can get it because of scarce resources. We have children at risk in every county, city and state in the United States. New funding is needed to help close the staggering gap between those children with access to our quality early learning programs and those without. We need to assure a sustained public funding base for early education, not only to improve access, but to also improve quality in every early childhood setting.

The bi-partisan Strong Start for Children Act would commit new federal funding, along with an umbrella of quality standards that will ensure that federal money is accountable and targeted to proven programs and positive outcomes. This will help those of us in the states fill gaps and strengthen our efforts towards building a high quality early childhood system with a strong framework and new resources.

Thank you for providing me with this time today. I am honored and humbled each day when I go to work to play a role in trying to make our office tagline, “great tomorrows begin today,” a reality for Delaware’s children, families and communities. Thank you.

Written, submitted testimony follows:



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Good morning. I am Harriet Dichter, Executive Director, Delaware Office of Early Learning.

Recently, Congress recognized the economic and educational payoff of early education and care and restored resources and helped expand the Child Care and Development Block Grant and Head Start and Early Head Start, as well as established another opportunity for states to expand preschool. I thank you for these advances, as well as for dedicating a hearing to early childhood development as you plan for the next phase of federal leadership and investment.

The importance of the first years of life is critical- the experiences children have during this unique time set the stage for all aspects of development and learning. Because of the developmental significance of this time, the quality of early childhood programs for both children and families is essential to good outcomes.

The Delaware Office of Early Learning was created by Governor Markell to assure a strong, integrated state-community effort for young children and their families, and to create an early learning system. Our priorities, depicted in a graphic in Appendix 1, include a focus on four essential areas: a healthy start for our young children; quality early learning; linkages and partnerships between learning, k-12, and higher education; and sustaining a thriving early childhood system. Our office works to unify and integrate the early learning programs of all of Delaware's agencies that have responsibilities in this critical area. The office covers the waterfront—we work with school and community-based programs for children from birth through full-day kindergarten. We count over 100 partners, which is a lot for our small state, and those partners include a big array-- school districts superintendents, principals, and teachers; child care and Head Start programs; foundations, universities, and business leaders; health and behavioral health providers; museums and libraries; and our families. Our partners are described in Appendix 1. To quote Fred Rogers, *"When I was very young, most of my childhood heroes wore capes, flew through the air, or picked up buildings with one arm. They were spectacular and got a lot of attention. But as I grew, my heroes changed, so that now I can honestly say that anyone who does anything to help a child is a hero to me." We have a lot of heroes!*

Delaware's young children and their families are fortunate to be supported by the commitment of Governor Markell and our state legislators. Delaware's state investment in early learning increased by one-third in the 2011 legislative session and has been further improved through our participation in the federal Early Learning Challenge. Our state effort included new resources to add to the payments (rates) for our child care providers and to fund a state-wide framework for early learning, known as Delaware Stars, that allows us to work with all of the programs to focus on quality improvement.

Improving the national track record for investments and outcomes for young children is essential. I have two points:

- 1) There is no one silver bullet, not just one investment or program that works. What matters, regardless the program, is quality. Quality is what is needed to produce positive outcomes. This means a common framework of high standards, accountability, continuous improvement, and sufficient investment in the workforce and the programs to make a difference.
- 2) The federal government has not been sufficiently proactive in this area, leaving too much to the states to do, notably on funding and financing.

First: To meet children's and family needs, we need a continuum of quality services. One size does not fit all. We can and should expect to make investments in programs, such as child care, pre-kindergarten and Head Start for example, and we should expect to invest in infants, toddlers and preschoolers in each and every year until they enter school. To meet the needs of our diverse families, we must provide a range of options (for example, full time vs. part time education and care, night and weekend hour care and education, speech and language development, special needs care). We must build confidence in the responsiveness and quality of early education services and ensure that public investments are made efficiently and are well-leveraged.

In Delaware, we take advantage of the existing array of early childhood programs and providers to create our system and to respond to the diverse needs of young children and families. We are systematically and voluntarily improving quality through Delaware Stars which integrates research-based standards and ratings, improvement supports, and financial resources. Delaware Stars is pivotal to our efforts, and it is available to all of our early learning programs on a voluntary basis. It has become an integrated framework for improving quality across sectors in our state. Our child care, Head Start, and preschool programs all participate in this effort.

Delaware Stars program is reaching children and their families through a large network of school district, child care, Head Start, and Early Intervention programs. We are particularly interested in how we are doing in serving our at-risk children, i.e. low-income children; children with developmental delays and disabilities, etc. In 2013, 7 in 10 of our at-risk children participated in an early childhood program in Delaware Stars. And 4 in 10 of these children are in a Delaware Stars program with a higher quality rating. These numbers are up from the previous year, and we have more assertive targets for 2014. At the same time, we set specific goals for working with programs on quality improvement, and we met those goals in 2013. Over 75% of our child care centers, which deliver services to the greatest number of our children, including our low-income children, participate in this program. And one last number--70% of our programs have made enough progress on quality improvement to have a Delaware Stars quality rating, and about one-third are now at our two highest levels. But you can see even with our focus and our progress, we have a long way to go to help our children meet their promise.

A quality program works in partnership with our families and helps to develop our children's skills and abilities not just in key areas of language, literacy and general cognition, but also works with our children to develop their social and emotional needs. This is the fuel for our children's success—their initiative, grit, persistence, resilience—that together with these traditional academic areas help pave the way to productive adulthood. A safe environment is necessary but not sufficient; a safe, learning environment with enough books and materials is necessary but not sufficient; a quality program provides this in the context of the teachers and families who work together to embed our children's learning in these relationships. And this becomes even more meaningful for our low-income families who may be juggling two or more jobs, may not have time or the skill to read to their children, and may have difficulty providing their children with enough healthy, nutritious food. Quality early learning is part of our equation for our children's school and life success. That's why we have so many partners and stakeholders in our efforts in Delaware.

We have a family-oriented website, available to them through their smart phones, that focuses on early learning from a family point of view and gets a lot of traffic. Here is what our families have to say about Delaware Stars:

- “I would recommend a Delaware Stars program based on the remarkable change we have noticed in our daughter's confidence, her ability to challenge herself more often, and an overall improvement in her social behavior and development skills.” Precious White
- “Since my son has been in a Delaware Stars program he continues to develop emotionally and has improved skills. It has really helped him grow.” Khaluah Mumin
- “My child is learning so much in a Delaware Stars program. It is a wonderful program.” Jannette Torres Rodriguez
- “I would recommend the Delaware Stars program because it's an assurance that the program will nurture and engage your child as well as develops independence and self-reliance.” Rebecca Kruer

To view the website, which includes a slide show of our families and their children, visit www.greatstartsdelaware.com.

And our providers share in that positive view:

- “DE Stars establishes a standard and defines quality from a child's perspective.”
- “DE Stars is an accountability system--and that is good.”
- “It is fun to watch a teacher have an “ah ha” moment when they realize what type of influence they have on the children. They all of a sudden see themselves as professionals.”
- “This process has been really helpful with getting front line teachers and assistants to understand and embrace quality improvement.
- Delaware Stars is a plus; “All programs in the state can be a part of it.”
- “A large number of programs are improving.”

- “We are reaching out to help the most needy children.”

We cannot serve our families with young children well using a silver bullet approach that focuses on one program, one age group, or one financing stream. Our goal is to serve the diverse needs of families while building confidence from business and other community leaders. Our framework includes:

- 1) High standards and expectations for program quality, based on research and experience, and focused on the best outcomes for children so all children enter school ready to learn;
- 2) Assistance to help teachers and programs achieve the necessary standards. It is not enough to set high standards, assistance is needed to achieve and maintain them. We must invest in early learning teachers if we are to achieve our desired outcomes for children and families. For example, in Delaware, one-fifth of our early educators have a high school diploma or less; just over half have a college degree. Their average pay is just over \$23,000, which is the poverty line for a family of 4 compared to \$40,000 for the average starting salary for those teaching in the early elementary grades;
- 3) Accountability for results—ensuring that public funds go to effective programs that support young children and their families; provide continuous improvement for all programs, including those that are not doing well; and communicate results to families and the broader community, including why they matter for our entire society; and
- 4) Financial supports that are linked directly and clearly to the standards at sufficient levels to get the job done by programs, and ensure that families have the means to afford high quality options for their children.

While the work is multi-faceted and dynamic —as it should be- it can be organized and coordinated into a realistic, achievable strategy through which we better serve our children and families and work collaboratively with the programs we count upon to deliver the services. (The quality goal is achievable within our varying state contexts.) We must respect our families and provide them with options that effectively meet the needs for their children in early childhood programs. We need to make sure we are focused on continuous improvement in what we do and to continue to engage our research partners to help us develop and improve our efforts. (To that end, in Delaware, thanks to our participation in the Early Learning Challenge, we are fortunate to have the RAND Corporation assisting us.)

An overview chart from RAND summarizing impacts on child outcomes from large publicly-financed preschool programs that have been rigorously evaluated. There are favorable impacts for children on a range of developmental measures of school readiness across these programs. This chart is a reminder that we all need to work together to create our learning systems and keep moving ahead.

We know good quality early learning programs work. We know from decades of scientific studies that children—and our communities-- benefit from them in many ways – better education, higher earnings, lower crime, resulting in greater public savings in the short and long terms. We have a large assortment of rigorous evaluations and studies to confirm this, conducted by well-respected institutions and researchers in our country. The question is not whether we know enough to proceed. We need to consider the many children and their families who would benefit if we do more, particularly those most at risk, and continue to move ourselves forward, always looking for ways to improve our work and our outcomes.

My second point is the importance of shared, responsible, and sufficient public investment in these programs. The funding streams we have, the Child Care and Development Block Grant and Head Start, are certainly insufficient. We have children at risk in every county, city and state in the United States. New funding is needed to help close the staggering gap between those children, particularly those at-risk of school failure, who are in our quality early learning programs and those who are not. We need to assure a sustained public funding base for early education, just as we work to assure a public funding commitment to K-12 education.

First, we should substantially increase investment in the established federal programs and funding streams, and again, I thank Congress for the work to support Head Start and Child Care in the recent budget and spending agreement. Second, we should commit to new federal funding, as suggested by the Strong Start legislation. States across the country are committing to an increased focus on quality early learning opportunities. Meaningful federal partnership and leadership is ripe and needed. This will help those of us in the states fill gaps and strengthen our efforts towards building a high quality early childhood system with a strong framework and new resources.

There is not just one program that works. Children need a continuum of early learning services, and a commitment to infants, toddlers, their families and preschoolers alike. One size does not fit all. It is fine to have a range of key programs and different hours of service because children and their families have different needs. It is in all of our best interests to be responsive and to focus on providing quality, expectations and support for high performance, and sufficient financing so that will get our children off to the best start possible. Parents expect that a program that opens its doors to them will serve them and their children well. From these simple precepts, there are several lessons that should inform the next phase of federal investment and policy.

Thank you for providing me with this time today. I am honored and humbled each day when I go to work to play a role in trying to make our office tagline, “great tomorrows begin today,” a reality for Delaware’s children, families and communities. Thank you!