

TESTIMONY OF
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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE
HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR, & PENSIONS COMMITTEE
UNITED STATES SENATE
HEARING ON
EARLY EDUCATION
FEBRUARY 12, 2002

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. I am honored to be here this morning to describe the progress we have made in promoting school readiness in California and to reflect on the lessons learned there and in other states. Today, I will make the case that Congress has an historic opportunity to do the right thing for children by investing wisely in the most neglected period of life: the critical years from the pre-natal stage to school-entry. As our nation focuses with a new sense of urgency on education reform, it is time we acknowledge and act upon one simple truth. If we truly want to improve our student's school performance, we must change the educational structure in America. We must build a seamless education system that begins before birth and ends at 12th grade.

Let me begin with a little background on how I became so passionate about this issue. In 1997, after conducting my own extensive research with scholars, business leaders, government officials, and philanthropists, I founded the I Am Your Child Foundation, a national, non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to focusing national attention on the urgent need for quality early childhood development programs. In collaboration with hundreds of national, state, and local groups, we launched the I Am Your Child Campaign to promote broader public awareness of, and investment in, the early years. The following year, in my home state of California, I authored Proposition 10, the California Children and Families Act, to build a comprehensive system of early childhood development for our

state's youngest children. Over the last five years, I have traveled across America working with federal and state leaders on similar efforts in other states. Working together, we have accomplished a great deal in these last five years – forging strong bipartisan support, identifying some new resources, strengthening programs, and measuring results. But we still have a very long way to go. Today we stand ready to enter a new phase that should redefine the national debate on education reform.

I listened with great interest to the First Lady's testimony before this Committee last month, and to the President's comments during his State of the Union address, about the need to enhance preschool programs and teacher training to achieve real progress in early literacy. I could not agree more. I have also spoken with Senator Kennedy about his early education proposal to improve the quality of early learning programs and to build a more coherent, comprehensive system. I also could not agree more. We have an unprecedented opportunity – starting today – to work together to bring about real change, to build a continuum of care for our nation's youngest citizens, and to enact meaningful education reform that reflects a true understanding of how our children learn.

In the last few years, science has confirmed what many parents, teachers, and caregivers have known instinctively: experiences in the earliest years have a profound effect on the way children learn, grow, and develop. These early experiences establish the foundation for children's future success in school, in the work force, and in life. Researchers have demonstrated that secure and loving attachments and the right kind of developmental experiences instill in children the social, emotional, and cognitive abilities they need. Unfortunately, while research and good common sense dictate that public support for the early years is critical to

school readiness, this is simply not where we are making our public investments. Today, America's system of early childhood education represents a haphazard, under-funded, incoherent approach that does not meet the needs of the vast majority of our nation's youngest children.

Congress recently enacted extremely important education reform legislation that will make a difference in establishing strong standards, promoting quality teaching, and expanding the resources devoted to low-performing schools. However, although this is much needed legislation that will strengthen our schools, it did not go far enough. Our current K- 12 elementary and secondary education system, designed over 100 years ago, is outdated and incomplete. Based on what science has shown us about how a child develops and learns, any educational reform that begins at kindergarten is simply too late.

We must include early care and education as part of an overall education system so that every child has the tools he or she needs to start school ready to succeed. Quite simply, the key to educational performance begins with healthy development before birth and continues with quality early care and education beginning the day a child is born. These early opportunities must not be left to chance; they must be embedded into our health care, social services and education systems. Only if we focus on healthy development, early learning, and safe and nurturing environments can all our children realize their full potential.

The absence of these essential building blocks can be devastating. Consider what we know: We know that low birth-weight, preterm infants are especially at risk for poor health and developmental delays. We know that the roots of academic difficulty are often established well

before a child's first day of school. It is a national disgrace that about one-third of the nation's kindergartners are not ready to learn, as judged by the real experts, their teachers. We know that children who fall behind before entering school have a far more difficult time catching up. We know that children who live with family and community violence in their early years suffer a multitude of damaging consequences that can last a lifetime and make learning all the more difficult.

Fortunately, we also know what works to help kids start school ready to succeed. Programs whose principles are consistent with what we know about healthy development and early learning have proven to be extraordinarily effective. Appropriate pre-natal care is an early learning program for two generations: it helps expectant mothers deliver healthy children. Well-designed home visiting programs for parents and their infants can help improve birth-weights and reduce premature delivery and child abuse. Effective parenting programs can help parents promote children's learning and social skills. High quality child care and preschool programs can reduce the need for special education, improve children's language and math skills in elementary school, and generate lasting benefits that produce significant cost savings in special education, welfare, and crime.

What we have learned in the past two decades about how young children learn and develop is truly extraordinary. The science is right on the money, but unfortunately the money is not on the science. The gap is simply too large between what we know and what we do.

In California, we are building an innovative statewide system that I believe will serve as a model for the nation. In November 1998, California voters passed Proposition 10, which dedicates approximately \$650 million a year toward building a comprehensive early childhood development system. The initiative created the California Children and Families Commission, the statewide leadership agency, which I am proud to chair, that oversees its implementation. The initiative also created 58 local commissions to provide the local guidance and decision-making on how the funding is directed in each county. In a state as vast and diverse as California, this structure enables each local community to determine the best possible use of funds for its own children and families.

Although the initiative provides local control, from our urban centers to our rural outreaches there is one overarching guiding principle of Proposition 10: to create a coherent, comprehensive school readiness system to ensure that every child is ready to succeed from the first day of kindergarten. Our commissions have spent the last two years designing and building these programs. This year we will see the launch of school readiness centers across California, focusing first on raising achievement in our lowest performing schools. Our school readiness centers, which are required to partner with neighboring schools, will open their doors on or near elementary school campuses across our state to provide every family access to pre-natal care, quality child care and preschool education, parent education, health care and early literacy programs at one easy-to-access site.

We realized early on with Proposition 10 that many programs for young children throughout California are needed to meet the demands of the nation's most populous state. And,

although the initiative has raised hundreds of millions of dollars, our funding is insufficient to address every early childhood issue in our state. However, what our new revenue can do is help create a unifying system – a system that links existing services like Head Start, Early Head Start and Healthy Families to new programs offering parent education and child care – and embed all these family services into our existing education system. Instead of using Proposition 10 to fund a series of programs in their own “silos,” our goal is to glue our programs together so that families can have access to convenient and affordable supports to help their children learn, grow, and succeed.

And our state’s diverse families are responding enthusiastically. As part of our parenting education component for school readiness, last November we launched a Kit for New Parents, designed to serve as a “parents’ instruction manual,” which includes educational videos on early bonding and attachment, health and nutrition, child care, early literacy, discipline, and safety, as well as a “Parent Guide” listing available services in each community for parents of newborns. In the first two months alone we have distributed more than 55,000 kits. Also, as part of our overall school readiness efforts, thousands of families have benefited from our mobile vans that bring books to underserved neighborhoods and from home visitation programs that bring public health nurses to support and teach new mothers. We also have funded programs that address retention and compensation of child care providers, as well as training programs that help child care providers become better teachers.

With our school readiness centers we are going to make early childhood services an integrated part of our elementary schools and create one system of education for our children.

Our ultimate goal in California is to stop funding K-12 and early childhood as two separate and distinct systems, and instead merge them into one seamless educational path for children.

Recently the California Legislature charged Proposition 10 with developing the school readiness component of the state's overall Master Plan for Education. Never before had the state's education planning framework even included an early childhood component. We are not merely writing a separate chapter on early learning, but creating, as I have said, a seamless education system from the pre-natal period to 12th grade.

Of course, California is not alone. Massachusetts, Georgia, North Carolina, Ohio, Connecticut, and New York, among others, are beginning to piece together coherent, comprehensive systems, guided by science, to benefit our youngest children. But the truth is there is still so much more to be done. In an era of grave state budget challenges, the federal government must invest more and must focus funding where help is needed most. Quite simply, every child in America deserves the same chance to succeed, and well-placed federal dollars in the early years are the only means to ensure that every child gets that chance.

Every state, including California, is heavily dependent on federal initiatives. From Head Start and SCHIP, to Medicaid, the Child Care Block Grants and Family and Medical Leave, our early childhood development programs are largely built on a federal foundation. Congress must keep these programs strong, especially now as states face large deficits. But Congress must do more. Federal legislation should provide incentives to the states to bring quality early childhood services into the education system and to develop and expand our best programs to best serve our children.

As our nation focuses on how to improve our education system to better serve our children, and to ensure our long-term competitiveness as a nation, we need to advance a bold new approach. I congratulate the Committee for the courage to change the nature of the debate and I issue this challenge: any new federal early education initiative must be guided by one essential question: will it address a robust, comprehensive vision of how children learn? Early childhood development is the key to improving America's schools and to the long-term strength of our nation. The science has told us, in no uncertain terms, that the early years of a child's life will set the trajectory of school performance and life performance. We should stop talking about tinkering with K-12 and start rebuilding the framework for P – 12, from the pre-natal period to high school graduation. We must have the courage as a society to close the gap between what we know and what we do. Thank you for inviting me to join you today.