

Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund Executive Director
Jim Redmon's Testimony to the Committee on Education and Labor

March 17, 2009

Chairman Miller, members of the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to talk with you today about early childhood education and the need for a coordinated, comprehensive birth to five system. I serve as the Executive Director of the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund. We are directed by state statute to undertake a variety of roles in funding and evaluating key children's programs in the state.

Let me start by saying that we strongly believe that program performance, accountability and outcomes need to be at the forefront of any early childhood system. Having a clear understanding of the science of early childhood enables us to direct resources to the most effective strategies at the right time for young children and their families. Parents, particularly those whose children who are at risk, need to know that we are committed to a high quality, voluntary system to ensure that our vision--that every child is ready to succeed in school—is met. By its very nature, a quality early childhood system includes all the people involved in a child's life—the most important being parents and families, but it also includes educators, child care and development professionals, doctors, nurses, and friends and neighbors in their communities. We live in a changing and diverse society in which how children are cared for has undergone a dramatic transformation over the last few decades. A majority of children receive some form of out-of-home care in the first five years, from an array of both public and private organizations. The quality of those programs varies greatly. In Kansas, as elsewhere, if we coordinate and set high standards there are tremendous opportunities but high costs with poor outcomes if we don't. We are striving for a system that is scalable to meet the needs of the child and family—intensive for those infants, toddlers and preschoolers and their families most at risk for poor developmental outcomes and supportive and informational for those not at high risk but who still need some help. But all services, from child care to health care, need to use those strategies that will increase the likelihood for positive outcomes for children—thus our interest in evidence and accountability.

My focus today is on our role in planning and the initial implementation of a coordinated statewide comprehensive early childhood plan and system for young children and families. In our role as a convener the Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund assumes responsibility for bringing professionals, parents and policy makers together for the purpose of providing direction for greater coordination and integration of an early childhood system, to have a single vision of school readiness and break administrative and programmatic silos.

There is broad agreement among political leaders that high quality early childhood programs can serve as a point of intervention that can tip the scales and mitigate risk factors leading to children not being ready to succeed in school. A focus on the early years-birth to five-has been nexus of policy and programming discussions and planning between the Governor, legislators, business leaders, and the early childhood community. Through this public-private partnership, we have forged a broad base of support for improving the early childhood system. As Governor Sibelius said during her 2008 State of the State Address, "We can't afford for any of our young Kansans to be so far behind that they never catch up by the time they enter kindergarten."

When services and programs are not purposefully coordinated on the state and local level, children and families have more difficulty receiving the services they need. This point is underscored by parents in Kansas and around the country. Parents tell us that they have system-wide concerns regarding the difficulty of locating information about early childhood services, a lack of communication across programs, and difficulty obtaining quality child care and pre-school and health insurance.

So, we have taken a systemic approach to early childhood—looking at coordination across the ages of birth to five. With the people listed above, we crafted an early childhood plan that serves as a blueprint for early childhood in the state. The plan is comprehensive and recognizes the whole child, with a focus on five key areas—Health Care, Mental Health and Social-Emotional Development, Early Care and Education, Parent Education and Family Supports. We have a flexible plan that guides our work from the state to the local level. State agencies, including our Departments of Education, Social and Rehabilitation Services, Health, Head Start Association,

state child care resource and referral agency, business leaders, political leadership, child advocates and higher education all have been instrumental in developing and implementing the plan.

Let me conclude with talking about the three funding streams that embrace state planning, collaboration, accountability and outcomes at the state and local levels—our Early Childhood Block Grant, Pre-Kindergarten program and Smart Start Kansas. In all of these funding streams, we fund community-level collaborations that must have clear outcomes for children and families, utilize the best evidence to develop services, and work together to avoid duplication. These are sound investments, even in difficult economic times. In some communities our Head Start programs, school districts, PreK and community child care are collaborating to make sure we have a seamless system for at risk 4 year olds. In others, private agencies, school districts and health departments are working together to make sure at risk newborns don't fall through the cracks and get the services they need to be ready for school.

However, there are still numerous challenges. Coordinating all of the funding streams for programs at a local and state level is difficult. A coordinated early childhood system on the federal level would help states to deliver and manage services more effectively. The data systems necessary to track child level and program level data don't always talk to one another or don't exist in ways that make the information easy to act on; and, the funding is not there yet to serve all the young children we know need help to be ready to succeed in school.

In the end, our experience in Kansas shows that our investments in early childhood must be smart—have a broad base of support, political leadership and focus on quality, outcomes and accountability using the best scientific evidence available. We should do no less for our youngest citizens.