

Testimony for House Committee on Education and Labor
“Importance of Early Childhood”
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Chairman Miller and members of the Committee on Education and Labor, thank you for the opportunity to share some ideas regarding early childhood- especially as it relates to what disadvantaged infants, toddlers, preschoolers and their families need to make the most of the earliest years of growth and development.

I represent the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, part of Susie Buffett’s foundation in Omaha dedicated to leveling the academic playing field by ensuring comprehensive, high quality birth to five services for our country’s youngest and most vulnerable children. In part, the Buffett Early Childhood Fund invests in building Educare Centers across the country. Presently, there are six sites in five states with four more scheduled to open in 2009 and 2010. Each Educare is a highly effective early care and education program especially designed to demonstrate what it takes to shift the odds in narrowing the student achievement gap.

I also bring to this discussion my twenty years of experience as an early childhood provider in a variety of settings, including Head Start plus another twenty years in policy work, first serving as a Nebraska state Senator for four years and then serving as the state human services director in both Nebraska and Iowa. Following my tenure in state government, I served as the Early Childhood Policy Director for the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation which took the lead in the development and successful passage of early childhood legislation in 2006 that established a \$60M early childhood endowment funded through a public and private partnership.

The research is clear- what happens in the first five years of life sets the stage for what will happen in the rest of a child’s life. Strong foundations in the very earliest years lead to positive outcomes – and greater economic returns -- in the later years. The bottom line is that wherever children are - at home, with grandma, with the next door neighbor or in a center-based program - children need caring, consistent, quality experiences from their earliest days and weeks in order to be successful in school and later in life.

While the value of safe, nurturing and stimulating environments is relevant for all children, it is especially critical for children who start life already behind – those born “at risk” of failing in school and in life because of variables such as poverty. In fact, the economic analysis of the return on the investment in early childhood that we so often hear about is based on studies of long-term effects of children *at risk* receiving quality early childhood education. It is our failure to invest in the youngest children most at risk that results in significant costs for states and our nation in terms of educational remediation, criminal justice, health care and loss of productivity.

But here’s the real kicker: the children who would benefit the most from highly effective early childhood programs are the ones least likely to have access to such programs. Families with limited resources can’t afford the programs that would best prepare their children for success in school. The costs associated with quality programming- highly qualified staff, small class size, low teacher-child ratios, parent engagement- make these programs prohibitive for families of low income. Even if scholarships were available to help parents pay for effective early childhood programs, few five star and nationally accredited programs are located in the neighborhoods with the greatest concentration of poverty. And families of low income often lack reliable transportation that would enable them to travel to where the programs of excellence exist.

Access to quality early childhood programs for families of low income is compounded by the fact that a significant number of these parents with young children are working (as required in the welfare reform of the nineties) and need full day, year round care. However, many of the programs designed to serve children at risk are often only part day and don’t operate all year. This means parents must arrange for care before and after the half day

preschool program as well as make special arrangements for summer breaks. Even if parents could find care to fill in the gaps, the half-day preschool programs are often inaccessible to families of low income because parents are frequently in jobs that do not allow them the flexibility to leave work to transport their child between child care and preschool. Furthermore, we need to acknowledge the research that indicates children need continuity in care and should not be shuffled between multiple early childhood programs – and multiple caregivers – every single day.

Although what many families need is full day, year round programming, policy makers have historically treated child care as a necessity for parents rather than a service for children. The child care subsidy available to parents with limited income is often viewed as only that which is needed to pay for someone to watch children while their parents work and is not recognized as an opportunity for early childhood education. This false dichotomy between child care and early learning needs to be eliminated- child care must be viewed as an early learning environment, especially since many children at risk are spending significant time in care by people other than their parents.

As a consequence of this false dichotomy, the child care subsidy often isn't funded to pay the costs of providing high quality, early learning environments nor is it managed to support effective program operations. For example, in many states, child care subsidy payments are based on 50-75% of market rates. Market rates don't represent what it costs to deliver evidenced based standards of quality, not to mention that paying less than market rates doesn't buy quality. Additionally, many states make child care payments based on attendance rather than enrollment. Programs must pay their teacher salaries and other operational costs regardless of whether all children enrolled show up every day. Parents who earn slightly too much income one month may suddenly be ineligible for the child care subsidy and unable to pay the full tuition. Programs can't always hold a spot in their program and they certainly can't cover the lost income. The bottom line is that many of the very best early care and education programs don't serve children dependent on the subsidy because the reimbursement doesn't begin to address their costs.

There are major challenges in providing quality services across all settings but it can be done. In Nebraska, very high standards of quality are attached to the state funds for birth to five services. However, there is also time allowed and funds available to assist programs in meeting those standards. For example, lead teachers in a preschool or infant toddler classroom are required to have a four year degree and endorsement in early childhood education. The program is given three years to achieve this standard and grant funds can be used to assist with post secondary education expenses. Most of the school districts in Nebraska have taken advantage of these early childhood grants and have successfully met the multiple quality criteria required. Annual evaluations of programs and child outcomes provide guidance for continuous assessment of effectiveness and need for program improvement. Programs are required to meet the needs of families so a variety of program modes are funded- home visitation, part day, and full day, year round programs. Common quality standards, clear pathways to meeting research-based standards of quality, sufficient funding for not only reaching these standards but for sustaining quality operations, and flexibility in meeting family needs have been essential elements in our efforts to build a comprehensive, highly effective, birth to five early childhood system.

The Nebraska early childhood funding structure also promotes partnerships between agencies and programs because we're able to deliver highly effective programs by combining and concentrating the resources of programs such as Early Head Start, Head Start, public school funds, state grants and child care subsidy. In fact, the funding criteria require public schools to partner with Early Head Start and Head Start as well as with other community based programs with expertise and experience in serving children birth to age five. Additionally, the local grantee must provide a 100% match but can do this with other federal and state funds thereby encouraging an even wider circle of collaboration across multiple programs and funding streams.

As a result of this partnership funding strategy, we have several outstanding early care and education programs providing what children and their parents need to make the most of the early years. In several communities, the public schools partner with the Early Head Start and Head Start provider, combining Title I funds with state early childhood grants and child care subsidy to provide comprehensive, birth to five programs of high quality that are

available for the full day and full year. In other communities, the school partners with a visiting nurses program to provide high quality home visitation services with teen parents and also partners with a private nationally accredited early care and education program to care for the children while moms are in school.

While these partnerships are fruitful, they are hard work to develop and sustain. Professionals with different training, different program goals, different jargon, and different management styles must engage in painful personal stretches to truly accomplish an authentic partnership that results in a really effective, integrated program. But most who engage in these partnerships believe passionately that this hard work will pay off for children and their families. Their dedication to the end goal sustains them through the process.

Although we have had many successes in our journey to build a comprehensive, highly effective, birth to five early care and education system in Nebraska, there remain many challenges. Partnerships have great results but are difficult to achieve when each program has different accounting systems, data requirements, eligibility standards, quality criteria and professional standards. Alignment of policies and funding structures across programs at both the federal and state level would greatly enhance the power to be gained from consolidating and concentrating our limited resources. Furthermore, our policies need to be in sync with what is known about good practice. For example, if continuity of care is critical for both learning and positive social-emotional development, then our policies must promote the integration of birth to five services in one place, with one set of caregivers. Finally, we need common standards and expectations for quality across programs- preschool, child care, home visitation- to ensure quality environments and experiences for children wherever they are.

Investing in the first five years is not just a wise investment policy for the good times- it is smart policy especially in these most difficult economic times. Parents who have lost their jobs and even their homes are under tremendous stress- stress that is felt by the children as well- stress that interferes with early learning. Family routines and stability in home environments help children develop internal controls; loss of routines and stability weakens the child's capacity to manage their feelings. Children can't wait for the economic times to get better; their development can't be put on hold. More than ever, parents need support in maximizing their child's healthy growth and development.

Investing in the first five years in these times is also smart as there is no greater value investment. That's why more of us in the private community are investing in the early years, especially for children at risk. To quote no less an authority than Dr. James Heckman, the University of Chicago professor who won the Nobel Prize in economics in 2000, "In an era of tight government budgets, it is impractical to consider active investment programs for all persons. The real question is how to use available funds wisely. The best evidence supports the policy prescription: invest in the very young."