LEADING TOGETHER:

Communities of Color
as Architects of Justice
for All Children in the
Commonwealth of
Massachusetts

Caroline and Sigmund
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The Schott Center
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PREPARED BY
Valora Washington, Ph.D.

Introduction

Massachusetts, home of the first public schools in America,[1] faces another leadership opportunity: the chance to offer early education for all of its young residents. There is growing consensus among key education and business leaders that investing in high quality, universal prekindergarten programs would be significant and wise: A series of longitudininal studies have shown that early education provides a strong foundation for the development of human capital as well as for economic growth.[2] Early education not only promotes "school readiness,"[3] it also prepares children for greater financial and personal success in their adult lives.[4] Unquestionably, "early education for all" is an idea whose time has come.

Supporting public and early education is the mission of the Caroline and Sigmund Schott Foundation and The Schott Center for Public and Early Education. Through a belief that diverse leadership is essential if equity and excellence are to be assured in early education, Schott has supported organizations that:

- Advance **legislative** remedies to achieve equality in educational opportunity;
- Challenge unfair practices through **litigation**;
- Support **leadership** and professional development opportunities;
- Use Schott resources as seed capital to **leverage** additional funds; and
- Create new and strategic **linkages** among advocates.

Each of these strategies is rooted in Schott's belief that we, as a society, can set a course toward constructive and inclusive outcomes that will benefit everyone in the Commonwealth. Diverse perspectives are essential to the integrity and quality of change efforts. This, Schott believes, is the essence of our pluralistic democracy.[5]

Deeply rooted in the founders' commitment to social justice, Schott seeks to ensure that early education is delivered in ways that are culturally appropriate and respectful of the home communities in which the children live. Indeed, our youngest residents are more likely than ever to represent a plethora of ethnic and linguistic heritage. Their families and communities must be heard throughout the public policy process, including initial discussion, planning and design as well as policy implementation and evaluation. How we collectively respond to this opportunity today will be the foundation of our collective prosperity, peace and potential *tomorrow*. Our immediate priority—as parents, teachers, policymakers and residents—is to prepare our children and ourselves for the wonderful opportunities that will emerge from our growing diversity.

To gather additional information about strategic opportunities to build public will for children, Schott convened four conversations with community and organizational leaders who have deep roots in Massachusetts, consistently support children's programming and are committed to work with communities of color. Participants in the "diversity dialogues" included a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds.[6]

Thirty-nine leaders participated in a series of four meetings held in March 2002. Three of the four diversity dialogues had a thematic focus on the needs of children with specific heritage: Latino, Asian and Black. The fourth dialogue focused on leadership and institutional challenges for communities of color.

It was anticipated that lessons learned from the dialogues would benefit the strategic thinking and professional development of all individuals who participated and the organizations from which they were drawn, as well as provide insight into the future programming of the Schott Foundation and the Schott Center.

This document shares the insights and reflections of the diversity dialogues. We are proud to present this summary of the hopes, goals and strategies of these thoughtful and talented professionals. Listen to the voices of outstanding leaders who shared with us five significant lessons: that diversity does indeed matter in the Commonwealth...that change strategies must invest in people and information... that effective strategies must include their communities as architects of change...that "leading together" is of great value...and that authentic leadership must remain closely connected to the families and communities served.

Diversity **MATTERS** in the Commonwealth

The participants in all four dialogues agreed without reservation: diversity MATTERS in the Commonwealth—and it matters a great deal.

There are growing numbers of people of color in Massachusetts:

- Asian Americans are the fastest growing racial group in Massachusetts, at about four percent of the population overall and eight percent in Boston. Between 1990 and 2000 the Asian population increased 68 percent.[7]
- Latinos had the highest numerical increase in growth of any other group, representing almost seven percent of Massachusetts' population. This population grew by 50 percent between 1990 and 2000.[8]
- African Americans make up about eight percent of the population in Massachusetts, increasing over 14 percent in the past decade.[9]

Diversity within these ethnic groups grew as well:

- Within the Asian population, the fastest growing subgroups were the Hmong, Asian Indians, and Vietnamese.[10]
- Immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa have a higher share of the overall population than African Americans in Boston.[11]
- The Latino community experienced a huge growth in the number of people with heritage from Brazil. Community leaders have estimated the Brazilian population to be 250,000. Although no definitive numbers exist, some social scientists believe that the Greater Boston area may have the highest concentration of Brazilians outside Brazil.[12]

The communities of color tend to be younger, and therefore even more relevant to policy discussions about the education and the well being of children:

- One fourth of the Asian American community is under seventeen; 9 percent of students enrolled in Boston schools are Asian; 4.4 percent of the school population in Massachusetts is Asian.[13]
- About 11 percent of all Massachusetts school children are Latino. This number increases to over 28 percent in Boston.[14]
- 8.5 percent of Massachusetts school children are African American. About 17 percent of these African American school children are in schools that are 90 percent or more minority schools.[15]

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The Boston Indicators Report[16] shows that more than half of the residents within the capital city of Massachusetts are people of color. Boston's population includes about 100 distinct ethnic and cultural groups. More than 140 languages are spoken in Boston homes. This report describes new immigrants as "revitalizing the regions' cities and replenishing the regions' workforce."

Ranking among the top tier of states in measures of child well being,[17] Massachusetts has historically been viewed as a place of educational innovation. Still, the advantages available to some children in the Commonwealth are not available to all. Poverty rates, for example, vary dramatically by race (one of every twelve white children is poor compared to one in two Latino children and one in three African American children).[18] The immediate and long-term impact of growing up in low income families is well documented.[19] These children tend to have more difficult school experiences.[20] The social costs are also high: every year a child spends growing up in poverty has an estimated cost of $11,800 in lost future productivity over his/her working life.[21] Still, Massachusetts spends 4.4 times more per prisoner than per public school pupil.[22]

Quality preschool is seen as a tool to address disparities between socioeconomic groups, and is viewed as integral to school reform. The absence of significant public investments in the education of young children has a disproportionate impact on children of color because they are more likely to be poor. Influencing public policy, therefore, is a priority strategy to facilitate equity and justice for these children. Addressing the possibilities for policy change, one participant pointed out:

"In order to get universal pre-kindergarten which will benefit poor kids, you have to recognize that the legislature is majority white and suburban. The reality is that 25 percent of the children in Massachusetts are of color and 75 percent are white. Trying to add or create diversity in policymaking and build a diverse coalition—you can build awareness in different communities but then there is no infrastructure to support that awareness. There are challenges at every level and a desperate need to support leadership at every level and have it be multi-faceted." [23]

Noting the need for change at every level of decision-making, diversity dialogue participants first pointed to the Massachusetts state legislature. It was found that:[24]

- Only five of 170 state representatives were African American and two were Latino.
- Two African Americans were state senators.
- One Latino was voted in 2002 as the first Latino state senator in Massachusetts.
- The membership of city councils and school committees similarly lacks diversity.

"If we are the **architects of change,** the programs will serve us."
Mary Jo Marion
Associate Director
Mauricio Gastón Institute

We Must be ARCHITECTS of Change

Akin to the lack of diversity in legislative bodies is the challenge of including diverse leadership at local and state professional bodies and advocacy tables. A clear message across all four dialogues was that the professional voices of people of color, and specific remedies to advance the quality of life for children of color, were often received with reserve, if they were received at all.

A sense of professional isolation and marginalization was expressed poignantly and repeatedly by accomplished professionals of Asian, African and Latino heritage. Virtually every individual related experiences of being "the only" person of color at key program or policy meetings. Participants spoke about the pressures they felt to be the spokesperson for an entire group. Another common experience was having their general ideas and contributions ignored—often to be embraced later when voiced by a white person. One member offered her historical analysis for this situation:

"The field of early childhood education has been conceptualized and led by white women. There are deep issues of research, practice, teacher preparation and leadership that need to be addressed. We need clarity in communities of color in order to create a public debate that engages all of us."

Most were less philosophical. Participants affirmed that, all too often, members from their communities were asked for feedback about a policy or program affecting their community after the program or policy was already designed:

"Communities of color are often regarded as the troops who come in at the ninth of ten meetings to bless or support other peoples' initiatives."

Suggestions to mainstream organizations and tables of power were often met with resistance or, even worse, were "unheard" or patronized. One member described her colleagues' frustration at a state policy meeting:

"They had to fight to say one or two things…it feels like they are hitting their heads against a brick wall."

This sense of isolation is hardly unique to the Commonwealth. On a national level, leaders of color express much the same sentiment:

"The success of our work…depends on the ability of community leaders of color to take an active, central role in developing policy solutions. Yet repeatedly, this nation's most talented, credible and dedicated advocates are excluded from critical decision-making venues. As a woman of color working at the intersection of implementation and policy regarding issues affecting children, families, and community, I am constantly amazed by how frequently I am nearly the only person of color present when policy is being discussed and decided."[25]

Cultural differences in group participation were also noted. Passion in speech is "authentic" in some cultures, but was interpreted as angry or ethnocentric in others. People of color felt their "voices" were often stereotyped; "fitting in" meant having to "re-voice" or strip their speech of the urgency felt in their communities.

The struggle to be "seen" and "heard" persists: a recent racial and ethnic profile of preschool teachers found that the teachers have less diversity than the children they teach.[26] And, "acknowledged leadership" in the field of early childhood includes a greater proportion of males, Caucasians and associates of universities and institutes of higher learning than constitutes the larger early childhood workforce.[27] Child care providers are typically women (over 98 percent), including one-third of whom are women of color.[28] Yet, dialogue participants described females of color in the early childhood workforce as concentrated in classroom or support roles, important contributors who nevertheless do not have the flexibility in their schedules to attend professional meetings or policy discussions that often occur during the workday:

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"Even African American directors are few and far between. There is a real lack of access for upward mobility."

There is concern that neither children nor programs are best served by these inequities in opportunities for leadership.

Change Strategies should INVEST IN PEOPLE and Information

Three areas of potential change generated the most discussion among dialogue participants:

1 The working conditions and opportunities for the child care workforce

2 Building public will

3 The need for data to support program and policy planning.

WORKING CONDITIONS AND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE CHILD CARE WORKFORCE are so vastly inferior as to threaten the potential for children's optimal growth and development. While participants differ in opinion about current efforts to raise minimum qualifications for the child care workforce, all agree that funding and policy supports are necessary to help those now in the field meet new requirements. Relatively positive examples of what could be done to help providers earn academic credentials occurred as a result of Congressional mandate (half of Head Start teachers had to have associate degrees by 2003)[29] and by a lawsuit in New Jersey (many providers now have bachelors degrees).[30] Such extensive policy and funding support is not yet available to support higher education for child care workers in Massachusetts:

Higher education must be an important and engaged partner in any change strategy. Without fiscal and policy support, higher education does not necessarily lead to parity in compensation, compared to public school teachers.[31] In Massachusetts, like other states,[32] preschool teachers are poorly paid, with an average salary of $21,060.[33] Given these wages, it is not surprising that the workforce turnover rate is estimated at nearly 30 percent in Massachusetts.[34] Our children pay the ultimate cost: a 2001 study found that more than 66 percent of Massachusetts private preschool classrooms did not provide the type of rich language environment that research shows is essential to children's language and cognitive development.[35]

"The early childhood workforce is so demoralized. They don't view themselves as professionals but as babysitters. They don't see that what they do can have a lifetime impact on children."

"In this field people feel undervalued, underappreciated, unsupported and unrecognized."

INFLUENCING PUBLIC WILL is seen as a key factor in creating the conditions for systemic change. Diversity dialogue participants imagined that greater public understanding about the value of the early years would increase public will to invest in quality care. A public education media campaign was proposed.[36]

"We need to change society's view of the importance of early childhood. In order for that to happen we have to go to different communities and really understand how they view early childhood education, in their own values, and how we can connect those values to the research about the importance of early childhood."

Creating a movement for early education would be enhanced, participants suggested, by additional data about the complex diversity among Commonwealth residents. **THE NEED FOR DATA ABOUT CHILDREN OF COLOR** was suggested strongly in each of the four dialogues. This information is needed to share with the public as well as for program and policy planning.

Policy recommendations would be enhanced by data about preschool children that is disaggregated by race, ethnicity, nationality and income level.[37] Statistical data about early childhood education and care is fragmented, inconsistent and inadequately funded.[38] Participants cited several examples where the lack of information was a barrier to service, advocacy, training and decision-making:

1 The rise in immigration from all ethnic groups compounds the difficulty of collecting data about specific race and ethnicities. For example, are Haitian and Cape Verdean immigrants counted as African Americans? Is anyone who speaks Spanish served appropriately when grouped as Latino despite different cultural origins? Is the designation "Asian" the best way to collect or analyze data for people of varying origin, such as Chinese, Japanese or those from India?

2 How do new immigrants of different ethnic groups make their child care choices? Who and what influences this decision-making?

A central question and recommendation related to the need to translate child development research and program information in ways that serve parents and providers from different groups:

"We have the research on the importance of early childhood, but how do we connect it to practice?"

"The importance of early childhood doesn't reach the parents or doesn't reach them in a way they can really understand it."

Families need high quality, full day, full year preschool options. Early education resources must reduce distinctions between "care" and "education." Yet, there is concern that neither state government agencies nor legislative bodies are sufficiently diverse, nor sufficiently grounded in community, to formulate or resolve these questions:

"They don't track the data by race and ethnicity. It's their excuse to do nothing."

*"When I think about the **need for leadership**, I think about how we don't know where Latino children are and that is a real void in terms of what is known about the type of care Latino children are using. Also, **where are parents getting their information from?** We have to do significant outreach to Latino families, how they get their information about child care and how they use this information is a real issue."*

Marta T. Rosa
Executive Director
Child Care Resource Center, Inc.

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Leading Together **REPRESENTS OUR VALUES** and a Strategy that Works

Effective implementation of strategies for change will require shared vision and collective action, dialogue participants agreed. Acting alone, few professionals are prepared to handle the complex realities of child and family life in the Commonwealth today.

In the past, local communities of color have not been called upon to play major roles in shaping the course of change.[39] As a result, these communities have relied heavily on developing their own structures and institutions to serve their needs and to advocate for their often-neglected interests.

Thinking about change for children in the 21st century evoked strong reactions:

"We won't be 'window dressing' at the table. There needs to be a significant amount of people at the table who care about diversity."

Debate ensued within and across dialogues about the goals and purposes of building leadership for children in communities of color. While many participants expressed the importance of joining and influencing mainstream institutions, others expressed a strong desire to build within the emergent communities:

"I can't wait for the mainstream organizations to change. We need to push our own communities to change the mainstream."

"We are torn between increasing community capacity and working to change the mainstream world. We don't have the capacity to do both.'

"The current early childhood leadership has been in control (for decades) and they are not ready to step aside and share that power. There is a reluctance to share those tables and those tables don't cater to how we participate."

"The onus isn't on us to change them, but they need to hear our voices. When we are in an institution, we can influence by being the dissident voice in the group."

"It is difficult to sit at the policy tables, but we have to be there! It is not enough to think we can create our own table."

In contrast, people spoke passionately about the strength and validation they experienced at community-based leadership and professional development circles:

"At MassLeap[40] we train leaders, but they don't want to go sit at those tables. They want to stay in their communities where they feel validated and empowered."

"The few diverse people who are successful are called upon to participate in too many committees and activities. That's why developing new leadership is so important."

"There is no forum for networking. Mentorship and role models are lacking...we need some kind of continuous forum."

An important value emerged: the desire to lead and work for change *together* rather than working in the more traditional "individual leader" mode. Social change strategies were seen as deeply rooted in the skills and capabilities that emerge from, and are rooted in, the cultural, spiritual, and social conditions that shape their community. Competency and capacity are not determined by wealth or educational and professional level. Grassroots leaders are the countless individuals who effect positive change in Massachusetts communities in ways that may not be known or acknowledged outside of their neighborhoods.

"How do we recognize our leaders? We look at community impact more than individual credentials."

Collective voice is seen as a key variable in challenging or expanding the thinking of established or "acknowledged" leaders. In this way, a greater atmosphere of receptivity would exist toward the perspectives, ideas and information that new voices brought to the table—voices not easily shut off, ignored or marginalized.

"Leaders need to groom other leaders to take their place, not just use leadership for their own egos."

"The role of charismatic leader doesn't provide enough value for the community, because that role is focused on one person, and one person is not enough."

AUTHENTIC LEADERS ACT, Sustain Links with Families and Communities

Leaders *act*, emphasized the dialogue participants. They are distinguished by their intuitive knowledge of how to get things done, how to cultivate new relationships, and how to influence others—as well as by their refusal to lose contact with or give up on their communities as they gain more influential roles.[41] The dialogue participants spoke respectfully about these authentic leaders and described them as persons having great empathy for, and knowledge about, the children and families with whom they worked or served:

"Our job is to help families figure out how to engage in shaping policy on a community, state and national level. When that work is done, change happens."

"The root is at the family level...policy has to nurture that root."

"When we ask ourselves **why some kids make it** and others do not, intuitively we know that early experiences play a large role. The **more positive experiences** we can provide early on, the more we can prevent. The reason we need to broaden the discussion beyond education is that we need to talk about family. As a diverse country, we **bring different values and these values are not necessarily negative**, but positive and can contribute to the overall community. Early childhood education is not just about education. It's about family support. The kids who are having problems are the kids who don't understand who they are. If we do good early childhood education, then we help them understand who they are and what their strengths are."

David Moy
Agency Director
Boston Chinatown
Neighborhood Center

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"How can we mobilize parents so that they will act and not just be educated? Providers can work with families to engage in legislation, but in order to do that, we need the connection to their lives and to the community. When people see their values reflected, then they will be engaged."

In essence, authentic leaders integrate their roles at both the grassroots and institutional levels. The roles of the "authentic leaders" are to bring new participants to the decision-making tables and to use their knowledge and skills to inform and catalyze others. Individual talent then becomes a platform for mobilizing community change process and public will. One participant called this:

"Charging in both directions."

Another noted that:

"Indigenous leadership [is] necessary for sustainability."

Seeking justice will require that:

"Service oriented organizations should have more of a civic orientation."

Caution was advised, however, as participants in each dialogue group discussed the economic fragility and pressure facing some community-based organizations.

"Before we focus on organizing, we need to realize that the community organizations themselves are weak."

"There are significant resource capacity issues."

Several participants spoke of the difficulty of overtaxing existing organizations that may not have early childhood issues on their agendas, but whose plates are already overfull with issues such as voter registration, housing, and k-12 education issues.

Also noted was the belief among some participants that the issue of gender is sometimes a barrier to advancing issues of early education in community-based organizations. One example of this view expressed across ethnic groups was stated this way:

"Many organizations are run by Latino males and they may have difficulty seeing the value of early childhood education. It is still considered a woman's job and the family's job."

New **LEADERSHIP** Pathways

Schott's role was not to critique what was shared, but to recognize the privilege of listening to these four groups of respected and thoughtful leaders.[42] We were impressed that several key themes emerged independently across these diverse communities of highly regarded leaders. We were humbled by their commitment and dedication to young children and to their communities. We recognized the few opportunities for strategic dialogue:

Everybody can be great... because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a **heart full of grace**. A **soul generated by love**.
Martin Luther King, Jr.

"These conversations are gold. What we've done at this meeting is a microcosm of what needs to happen on a regular basis."

While the five themes were similar across groups, and all groups addressed issues of culture, language, data, policy, family, and community, there were differences in points of emphasis.

- The Latino dialogue spoke most directly about the impact of speaking a primary language other than English as a major barrier to career advancement and leadership opportunity. Another area of emphasis was leveraging collective emergent power.

- The Asian American dialogue pointed out the paucity of data and the need for information and research. Community organizing was also recognized as an important strategy.

- The African American dialogue reflected a deep sense of heritage and "place" in Massachusetts. Interestingly, some dialogues referred to the African American community history of organizing and protest as a prototype for change. The dialogue focusing on black children, while acknowledging past successes, focused on the need for a paradigm shift as the concept of "diversity" expands.

In all four dialogues about creating change for children, the sense of sharing a comparable fate emerged, even though there is by no means homogeneity, even within groups.

"If the boat goes down" stated one participant talking about the various Latino groups, "we will all be in it."

"It is necessary for the Asian, Latino, and African American communities to come together."

Overall, participants urged each other and their organizations to continue to encourage diversity in the field of early care and education, as well as in advocacy and research. Yet there is a strong recognition that demographic diversity does not necessarily predetermine any particular outcome.[43] For example, child poverty did NOT improve during the Commonwealth's economic boom times, and the poverty rates have only worsened in recent years.[44]

Given the significant challenges in the field of early care and education, there is a clear and compelling need for dynamic leadership at all levels. Such a leadership strategy would be transformational (of systems and of communities) and would be focused on issues of equity and justice. We are encouraged by the inclusive, democratic and collective vision of leadership expressed by the dialogue participants. Leading change for children in communities of color is essentially a question about how we will share power in our democracy.

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LEADING TOGETHER
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