Professionalization & the Wisdom of the Field:

Managing Change in a Changing Early Childhood Education Landscape

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INTRODUCTION

The field of early childhood education (ECE) has been in a period of continuous change over the past two decades, adapting to new governance models, state and federal policy, and funding mechanisms, and strengthened program standards, accountability systems, and educator qualification requirements. The changes reflect growing expectations for early education to support a wide range of developmental and academic outcomes for diverse children and families. Efforts to create greater systemic alignment within program and service delivery models are intended to bring some coherence and control over a historically fragmented field. These trends are straining the capacity of ECE providers and challenging the inherent wisdom in the field on how best to support the relational and developmental needs of young children and their families.

Over the past 20 years, early education has been more fully integrated into state and federal education policies and is now conceptualized as a component of national education reform efforts. Expanding access to high quality ECE programs, particularly for low income and culturally and linguistically diverse children, is a core strategy to foster school readiness and close persistent gaps in achievement between subgroups of students (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). There is broad consensus on the long term economic, social, and academic benefits early education imparts on children, families, and society at large. For many observers, quality early education for all children is the missing link in a world class education system that supports positive outcomes across the continuum from cradle-to-careers.

Despite this, the field remains largely underfunded compared to the K-12 and higher education sectors and a strong cultural value persists in the country that parents are primarily responsible for their children's education before they enter school. In 2004, annual per capita state and federal education funding for children 0-5 was less than $1000, compared to nearly $5,500 for students in K-12, and nearly $4000 for students in postsecondary education (Bruner, Stover Wright, Gebhard, & Hibbard, 2004). Chronic underfunding and inattention has weakened the capacity of providers to respond to new state and federal mandates and demands for measurable outcomes. It has also limited the capacity of state governance systems designed primarily to manage access, licensing, and regulatory mandates to facilitate the types of programmatic reforms that support high quality early education.

Traditionally, most state and federal policies for "care" and "education" of young children have developed separately with responsibilities spread between multiple education and health and human service agencies. Such development has led to fragmentation in the field, with a lack of

coherence in governance, policy development, program delivery, and resource allocation. This has created wide variation in funding requirements, operational procedures, regulatory frameworks, staff training and qualifications, and outcome goals. As a result, the ECE field is characterized by a patchwork of private and public providers, including large numbers of home-based family child care providers, persistent access and affordability issues, widely variable quality, lower staff qualifications, and lower professional compensation for providers and administrators (Bennett, 2011; Regenstein & Lipper, 2013).

Nationwide, about 90% of the total costs of child care and early education is assumed by parents (Child Care Aware of America, 2012). Demand side approaches to funding have created significant gaps in services and quality, particularly in rural and low income areas, that affect cumulative outcomes as children transition across educational systems (Bennett, 2011). It has also created an ECE system that historically has been more responsive to family needs and community values than to formal education agendas.

With the exception of state funded preschool or federal Head Start, most programs must operate as small businesses balancing the supply of services with the demands of their customers. This is significant since there is little evidence that current calls for reform in standards, educator training or accountability are coming from parents. In fact, studies of parental perceptions of quality find that they view developmentally appropriate interactions and support for socio-emotional development as most important. Parents also view practices that are sensitive to family needs as very important, including consistent communication and flexibility in services that support their work needs (Cleveland, Susman-Stillman, & Halle, 2013).

Parents are key stakeholders in early childhood education and the choices they make for their children are a vital issue facing policymakers. Despite efforts to create rating systems to inform parents on quality indicators, there is little evidence that such systems influence parental choices or reflect what parents' value in educational settings for the young children. For many parents, cost, accessibility, and trusting relationships with caregivers are the primary drivers of choice. For most providers operating on razor thin financial margins, there are few incentives to invest in quality improvement efforts such as hiring better educated teachers that don't lead to greater revenue and the promise of economic stability (Alvarez, Epps, & Montoya, 2015).

While current policy and funding initiatives are prioritizing enrollment in more regulated center-based ECE programs, the reality is that the majority of children are enrolled in largely unregulated home-based care, including unlicensed family, friends, and neighbor (FFN) care and licensed family child care settings. Home-based care, moreover, is the most common form

of child care for infants and toddlers, low income families, immigrant families, and single parent households (Child Trends, 2014; Porter, Paulsell, DelGrosso, Avellar, Hass, & Vuong, 2010). Under federal funding rules, states have few restrictions on how money is spent and the largest funding stream for vouchers and other subsidies serving low income families—the Child Care and Development Block Grants (CCDBG)—emphasize parental choice. Families are free to choose child care arrangements that best suit their needs regardless of the program type or quality (Adams, Spaulding, & Heller, 2015).

These field realities have made it particularly difficult for states to create coherent and integrated ECE systems that address children's health, developmental, and educational needs and ensure that parents have the capacity to support their families' economic, social-emotional, and academic needs. No single approach exists to address all these elements of a comprehensive system for children and families. Effective implementation of programs and services is dependent upon diverse policies affecting health and human services, education, and economic and workforce development.

How state's structure their ECE governance is significant given the authority that states have over federal early education funding, particular CCDBG funds and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) for child care. States are free to develop policies on how federal dollars are used to support access for low income families and create the regulatory and licensing frameworks that facilitate program and service delivery. Within the state context, the federal government really only has regulatory authority over Head Start and Early Head Start programs which serves a small percentage of children attending ECE programs.[1] Of the nearly 220,000 children in Massachusetts enrolled in ECE programs, only 57,000 receive child care subsidies and less than 10,000 are enrolled in federal Head Start (Administration for Children & Families, 2015). This hands-off approach, however, is changing.

Under the Obama Administration, the federal government has been exerting more influence over early education policy and practice at the state level. Federal education grants, such as the *Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge* (RTT-ELC) and the *Preschool Development Grants*, provide powerful incentives for states to adopt new program quality and accountability standards particularly during periods of state budgetary constraints. These grants require states to align their standards and regulatory systems with federal education policy as a condition of eligibility. More significant, on December 10, 2015 the President signed the Every Student

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[1] In 2015 total funding in Massachusetts through CCDF and TANF for child care was over $530 million (this includes about $40 million for quality-related expenditures) while funding for Head Start was about $107 million (Administration for Children & Families, 2015).

Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law, the long awaited reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), known better as No Child Left Behind. For the first time legislation governing federal education policy includes dedicated funding for early childhood education.

Nationally and in Massachusetts significant work has been done over the past 10 years to address systemic fragmentation and align policy development. Despite this period of experimentation, we still lack empirical data on how new governance structures, policy initiatives, funding mechanisms, standards development, and accountability mandates have affected the functions of state early childhood systems to support positive outcomes for children and families (Gomez, 2015). Further, there is little evidence that these systems support the adaptive capacity of the field to proactively address the continuous changes that are affecting the ECE landscape.

THE CHANGING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

Across the country a mixed system of school-based pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) programs and both publicly and privately funded center-based and family child care and home-based care programs support the educational and social-emotional development of children and their families. Between 1990 and 2008, enrollment of 3- to 5-year olds in publicly funded ECE programs more than doubled from 1.2 to 2.7 million children, and current estimates suggest that approximately 60% of the country's 24 million children under age six are enrolled in some form of early education (Child Trends, 2014). Despite this growth, the U.S. continues to lag other industrialized countries in enrollment of 3- and 4-year olds in early education (OECD, 2015).

Since the 1990s, public investments in early childhood education increased dramatically, spurred by welfare reform, expansion of female labor force participation, and a deeper understanding of child development and the value of early education on young children's social and cognitive development (Bassok, Fitzpatrick, & Loeb, 2011). The Obama administration launched the Zero-to-Five initiative to invest an additional $10 billion per year to expand Head Start, universal preschool, and the child and dependent care tax credit. In 2010 an additional $8 Billion over eight years was earmarked for the RTT-ELC grant program to support a wide range of access, quality, and data systems initiatives in early education (Daugherty, 2010). During the 2013 *State of the Union* address, moreover, President Obama outlined a proposal to make preschool available to all children in America, a proposal that the Center for American Progress estimates would cost nearly $100 billion in additional federal and state education funds (Brown, Cooper, Herman, Lazarin, Linden, Post, & Tanden, 2013).[2]

These initiatives have accelerated alignment efforts between state and federal early education policy. For education reformers, policymakers and influential policy coalitions such as the National Governors Association, strengthening early childhood systems supports broader education goals to improve school readiness, close achievement gaps and reduce high school dropout rates (Demma, 2010). New funding mechanisms for ECE are prioritizing access and quality improvement in center-based settings, particularly for low income 3- and 4- year olds who are about to transition to kindergarten and are at risk of falling behind academically (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). An often cited statistic is that only 3 in 10 young children have access to high quality early learning opportunities (Mulligan, McCarroll, Flanagan, &

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[2] This proposal includes a scaling up of the program over 5 years, targeting access for low income children first and then expanding to full coverage. When fully scaled the program is estimated to cost an additional $12.3 billion per year.

Potter, 2014). However, the question of how best to measure and improve quality remains open to debate and largely dependent upon the particular needs of diverse children and families.

Enrollment in early education has increased across all racial, ethnic and socio-economic groups, but overall young children in the U.S. are becoming more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse. Since 2000, 57% of the total population growth in the U.S. took place among immigrants and their children and nearly 30% of all young children under age six have at least one parent who speaks a language other than English (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2014). Compared to native-born White families, immigrant families have lower parental education levels, higher child poverty rates, and lower rates of English language proficiency. These factors have a significant negative impact on children's educational, health, and social outcomes (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2014; Passel, 2011; Wilson, 2014). ECE access for culturally and linguistically diverse children is largely driven by the historical intersection of child care and workforce development policies designed to support working parents (Adams et al., 2015). This creates growing demand for programs to address a much more complex set of academic, social and linguistic needs of the children they serve.

Mirroring demographic trends among children, the ECE workforce is increasingly diverse in terms of their racial and ethnic composition, their reasons for entering the field, and their educational background. Between 1990 and 2015, the workforce—comprised primarily of females (95%) with an average age of nearly 40, 61% of who are White, 19% Latino, and 16% African-American—grew from just over 1 million to nearly 2 million, nationwide. The majority of workers in the field are part-time and the average annual salary is between $8,000 and $13,400, well-below the federal poverty level. Even among the 48% of workers who are full time, salaries average only between $21,000 and $25,000, or slightly above federal poverty levels (Park, McHugh, Zong, & Batalova, 2015). Despite persistent issues of provider turnover in the field, moreover, over 75% of providers have over 5 years of experience working in early education settings (National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team, 2013).

Immigrant workers account for nearly 20% of the overall ECE workforce and they are concentrated in the lowest skilled and lowest paying segments of the field—home-based and family child care (Park et al., 2015). Over the past 25 years, the immigrant share of the workforce grew by over 250% compared to only 38% for native born workers. In a field where 55% of all workers have a high school diploma or less and 63% hold less than an associate's degree, immigrant workers are five times more likely to have less than a high school diploma (Park et al., 2015). Between 2009 and 2010, 25% of the field left, with new entrants coming

primarily from occupations with a lower level of education and earnings than 60% of the entire U.S. labor force (Bassock et al., 2013).

With increases in public funding, state, and local stakeholders have pushed for efforts to improve the quality of early education settings through competency-based workforce development and curriculum standards, Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS), career lattices, accreditation systems, and programs to recruit, reward, and retain a professional workforce. About 40 states now require lead teachers to possess a bachelor's degree with specialized training in ECE to work in state funded Pre-K programs and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) includes a bachelor's degree requirement in their new accreditation standards. The reauthorization of the federal Head Start program in 2007, moreover, requires 50% of lead or assistant teachers to hold a bachelor's degree or other advanced degree (Bassock et al., 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2015; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). Despite these policy shifts, the majority of educators (60%) who work in center-based settings are not affiliated with public schools or the Head Start program (National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team, 2013).

The shift from "care" to "education"—often referred to as a hybrid "educare"—has resulted in the standards and accountability movement that has driven education reform over the past 20 years to be the driving force in a changing ECE landscape (Browne, 2009). Efforts to professionalize the workforce are coming into conflict with the realities of the field and decades of research on child development. Low compensation and poor working conditions present few incentives for low skilled workers to pursue postsecondary degrees. There is also little evidence that our systems of higher education have the capacity to create viable pathways for large segments of the existing workforce. Elevating measures of academic outcomes to assess ECE quality, moreover, potentially disrupt the relational and developmental assets that currently exist in the field. These realities are challenging the capacity of current governance models to address the systemic change that is necessary to achieve the types of outcomes that are demanded by current policy initiatives.

ACOUNTABILITY, PROFESSIONALIZATION & THE WISDOM OF THE FIELD

Despite their pervasive influence, standards and accountability in ECE are a relatively new development. In 1999 only 10 states had any written standards for the developmental and learning expectations of children before they enter Kindergarten. By 2002, 27 states had formal standards and today all states have early learning standards and the majority of states have also adopted developmental and learning standards for infants and toddlers (Scott-Little, Lesko, Martella, & Milburn, 2007). While states have invested significant resources in the development of standards, observers have questioned how effective states have been implementing new standards into their ECE systems. Until recently states have invested few resources in educator training and information distribution and institutions of higher education (IHEs) were slow to integrate standards into their ECE programs (Scott-Little et al., 2007). Most states, moreover, only applied standards to state-funded preschool programs further exacerbating fragmentation within the field (DellaMattera, 2010).

While most states initially developed ECE standards to improve educator practice, inform quality improvement efforts, and to guide child assessments, more recently standards have become central to efforts to support outcome-driven accountability systems. This reflects a shift in ECE governance from an emphasis on access to compliance and alignment with K-12 content standards. Rather than developing early learning standards around the unique developmental indicators of early education, such as relational and social-emotional competencies, most states pushed down academic standards for K – 3rd grade into ECE programs serving 3- and 4-year olds (DellaMattera, 2010; Scott-Little et al., 2007). As a result, state standards, such as Massachusetts's Guidelines for Preschool Learning Experiences (MGPLE), are heavily weighted toward cognitive indicators rather than biosocial or psychosocial indicators that have also been linked to school readiness and success, particularly for low income and racially and ethnically diverse students (Brooks-Gunn, Rouse, & McLanahan, 2007; DellaMattera, 2010).[3]

Concerns over the developmental appropriateness of early learning standards have been a point of contention since the first standards were created. The concerns were recently reiterated by the National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in response to the Common Core State Standards. While supportive of clear, attainable learning goals for young children in ECE programs, the NAEYC and others have raised questions about the emphasis on math and language arts outcomes, the lack of attention to the whole child, and the potential impact of a narrowing of the curriculum in ECE programs (NAEYC, 2012). Many advocates

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[3] Many states, including Massachusetts, now have early learning standards for science, technology & engineering (STE). See http://www.mass.gov/edu/docs/eec/2013/20131009-pk-sci-tech-standards.pdf.

believe that such standards do not allow for individual, familial, and community values and beliefs that are contextualize to specific educational settings. According to Graue (2008), "There is a feeling that we are moving away from traditionally developmentalist approaches viewed as child centered to more content-focused perspectives related in linear ways to student outcomes" (p. 442).

This change is challenging the established wisdom of the field and is fostering a fundamental shift in how children are being taught in early education settings. To ensure programs are integrating new standards and achieving positive outcomes as measured by new assessments, children are increasingly subjected to more academic instruction at the expense of play and informal engagement with peers and adults, and activities that reflect their cultural and community values. These changes are occurring despite decades of research that support the value of these activities to long term positive outcomes for children (DellaMattera, 2010). It is not surprising that studies of provider perceptions of their role finds that they have strong and often negative feelings about new approaches to pedagogy and professional development that are content driven rather than child or family centered (Kruse, 2012; Lanigan, 2011).

New mandates shaping educational requirements, instructional practices and child assessments are often met with skepticism by many providers and advocates in the field. While the current workforce has many competencies critical in serving diverse students, they often lack the specialized training and knowledge to apply standards to their instructional practices and utilize new assessment tools to assess student learning. There is concern that new qualification standards will push many current workers out of the field—particularly older workers who are culturally and linguistically diverse—given systemic barriers to postsecondary education facing nontraditional students (CAYL, 2015). Not only would this reduce the experience in the field, but it would inhibit the field's ability to support linguistically diverse students through strong program-family-community connections. Others are concerned that new standards and compliance mandates may weaken the current mixed delivery system as underfunded center and home-based providers struggle to meet new requirements.[4]

Research on child development and neuroscience support the contention that young children learn through active, sensory engagement, interactions with peers and adults, and opportunities to be creative in play. Yet, policies are promoting an approach to educating young children in Pre-K through rigorous instruction and clear mapping to K – 3rd grade proficiency benchmarks (Graue, 2008; Grisham-Brown, 2008). Assessments of limited relevance to learning capacity,

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[4] Between 1997 and 2011 the percentage of children cared for in home-based licensed FCC providers decreased from nearly 23% of all children to only 14% of all children in child care (Child Trends, 2014).

such as naming letters and numbers, have become the norm when the most important competencies of young children—social and emotional well-being, curiosity, imagination, risk-taking, problem-solving, and self-regulation—cannot be tested. This raises important questions about the motivations for such assessments; are they in place to monitor policies and proficiency mandates or to act in the best interest of children? While these two goals are not mutually exclusive, just raising such questions is often met with significant push-back.

Within the current culture of accountability arguing against standards-based approaches is seen as unprofessional and supportive of low expectations and educational inequity (Graue, 2008). Norms of professionalism in early education stress professional boundaries, impartiality, standardized services based on scientific, evidence-based practices, and expert knowledge capable of translating child development theory and research into practice. Observers have argued that this has moved formal child care and education programs to adopt prescribed approaches that embrace institutionalized and bureaucratic norms more closely aligned with schools (Bromer & Henly, 2004; Douglass, 2011; Kagan & Kauerz, 2007). There are inherent tensions between what we know about the value of relational practices, play, and cultural, linguistic, and community competencies in fostering high quality early childhood education and the increasingly narrow measures of quality elevated in current policies. As Reed (2011) observed,

> People have different views of what educational outcomes should be considered as quality, and how they are reached. This differs from the body of knowledge about quality that predominates, much of it emanating from the USA. It suggests that quality practice and provisions can be examined in terms of its longer-term effects on children's learning and development and that it revolves around those aspects that can be monitored, changed and imposed by regulators and government. (p. 15)

Perspectives on quality are highly personal and complex and given the diversity among practitioners in ECE it is not surprising that there is little consensus about the most appropriate ways to address quality improvement. State developed QRIS have been promoted as mechanism to provide parents clear information on how to select high quality programs and as a roadmap for program improvement. While such systems have value there is a danger that they will become merely compliance tools to ensure that programs hire educators with the right qualifications who follow state-developed curricular and regulatory mandates, rather than focus on the dispositions, attitudes and competencies required to support the diverse needs of children and families (Reed, 2011). Such systems, moreover, narrowly focus data gathering and

reporting on program and provider effectiveness rather than the effectiveness of broader early childhood education systems that are necessary to affect real long term improvements that affect positive outcomes.

Compliance systems also ignore the economic drivers of provider decision making regarding programmatic improvements. ECE providers must engage in a cost-benefit analysis before engaging in quality improvement efforts such as participation in state QRIS programs or the pursuit of national accreditation. While the barriers to entering the field are low the costs of reaching higher levels of the state QRIS are significant given the higher cost of more qualified staff. This can greatly increase a program's fixed costs that are not supported by common reimbursement models, particularly for low income children. In short, as quality increases the gap between subsidies and the cost of care gets wider resulting in programs that operate with a high degree of economic uncertainty (Alvarez et al., 2015).

These factors act to keep wages and benefits for ECE educators low. The limited studies that have explored the relationship between efforts to professionalize the field and the realities of poverty wages, few benefits and job insecurity have found that despite high levels of intrinsic motivation to work with young children, many experienced and well-trained educators do not see long term opportunities in the field (Boyd, 2013; Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014). For many adult educators, the potential long term economic payoffs for attaining postsecondary degrees will most likely be outside of early education given their immediate need for family-sustaining wages.

Part of the problem facing the field is that we lack the research to develop effective policies that reflect an empirical understanding of practices and strategies that improve program quality and outcomes for children and families. New degree mandates for providers, for instance, are being implemented despite the fact that there is no research base linking associate, bachelor or other degrees to improved outcomes for children (Zaslow, Tout, Halle, Whittaker, & Lavelle, 2010). We have scant data on ECE degree programs in higher education and how they relate to educator performance and persistence in the field. There is little evidence that state systems of higher education have the capacity to serve the needs of nontraditional students, particularly working adults who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CAYL, 2015; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). Researcher, moreover, are increasingly critical of the validity of program environmental rating scales, such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS), that are fully integrated into state QRIS and the basis for much of the quality research on ECE programs despite their limited value in predicting child outcomes (Bumgarner, 2013).

Standards for program quality linked to accountability systems with clear assessments of desired outcomes and more stringent professional qualifications for educators have value and merit for the field. When policies are applied in such a way to support the diverse developmental and learning needs of young children and the overall well-being of their families, we all benefit. When education and workforce development systems are aligned to address mutual goals to support learners from the time they are born through their careers we empower both children and the adults who nurture, engage, and teach them. When workers are compensated at a level equivalent to other professionals with similar education and responsibilities, they feel respected, valued and supported in their work. And when we intentionally apply an early learning pedagogy based on decades if child development research and a shared understanding for the types of outcomes we want in our children, they thrive.

Ensuring that policies are developed and implemented in such ways is difficult and requires effective governance with the leverage to move diverse and fragmented systems and the adaptive capacity to respond to dynamic social and economic change.

GOVERNANCE – MANAGING SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

"Governance is a strategy, not a goal" (Regenstein & Lipper, 2013, p. 2)

How governments provide for the care and education of their youngest citizens often incorporates multiple public policy domains and systems within health, human services, and education. In 1999, the U.S. Government Accounting Office identified 69 federal programs supporting education and care for young children across nine different federal agencies (Bennett, 2011). This is not unique to early childhood, but such fragmentation exerts a particularly difficult challenge for a field responsible for the well-being of young children given what we now know about the importance of early learning opportunities to an individual's long term growth. It also means that accountability for outcomes is narrowly focused on programs or individual educators rather than the broader familial, community, societal, health and educational systems that are necessary to support young children.

One of the results of this fragmentation is that programs have developed in response to either public funding models or parental demand to address multiple needs for child care for infants and toddlers, preschool education for 3- to 5-year olds, or more common some hybrid of the two to support children's developmental and learning needs. Fragmented systems have led to variations in funding requirements, operational procedures, quality standards, regulatory frameworks, and staff training and qualifications. The child care sector has historically suffered from weak state investments that have resulted in lower staff qualifications and often poor working conditions. Early education, particularly in Head Start and state-funded pre-kindergarten programs, is often directed toward narrow academic goals and assessment protocols that many practitioners believe are not developmentally appropriate (Bennett, 2011).

Early childhood education governance approaches assert a strong influence over how state systems develop and evolve and, in turn, affect the services that are provided to children and families. Current policy trends in learning standards, accountability and assessment, and professionalization are driven by approaches to governance that have articulated care and education during the early years as a mechanism to address outcome goals across K-12 systems. As the National Governors Association has argued, among the core policy strategies necessary to create a comprehensive ECE system include aligning early learning standards and guidelines with K-3 learning standards, developing longitudinal and integrated ECE data systems, and ensuring program compliance and accountability through statewide QRIS (Demma, 2010). This objective was recently articulated by Massachusetts' Secretary of Education Jim Peyser, who testified in September 2015 to the Joint Committee on Education:

The overarching education objective of the Baker-Polito administration are to close the achievement gap and strengthen the global competitiveness of Massachusetts' workforce and economy . . . short-term bias often inclines policymakers towards a disproportionate interest in reform and improvement within the K-12 system and higher education. But, as those of you on this committee know well, most educational deficits and obstacles begin before a child even enters Kindergarten and, unfortunately, the odds of overcoming them in time to make a real difference in a child's academic career are frequently long. In pursuing our shared goals, we cannot afford to treat early education as an after-thought.[5]

It is helpful to conceptualize ECE governance across three dimensions: 1.) form – the structure of governance in which various functions are carried out; 2.) function – the core tasks and responsibilities of the structure, including policymaking, funding, program service and delivery, and accountability; and 3.) durability – the degree to which governance structures are able to withstand political, economic, and sociocultural change (Gomez, 2015). There are two often overlooked aspect of ECE governance functionality, including **exploration** ("adaptive capacity") – the capacity of governance structures to support innovation and experimentation to develop flexible strategies to govern complex systems; and **leadership** – the ability of governance structures to assert influence over policy and practice across systems and disciplines that support early education.

Across the country there are a variety of models of ECE governance, most of which fall into three basic structures. The most common form is coordination of programs and services across multiple state agencies, often with state level leadership provided by a dedicated position in the governors' office or statewide task force or children's cabinet. These systems differ depending upon the formal mechanisms in place to foster multi-departmental collaboration. Another common model is consolidation of multiple programs and services within one agency, such as a state department of education that has authority and accountability over ECE functions. Where authority is placed has influence over the underlying values and principles that guide a state's early education efforts.

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[5] Text of Secretary Peyser's comments was found on a Strategies for Children, *Eye on Early Education* blog post by Alyssa Haywoode, 21 September 2015; http://eyeonearlyeducation.com/2015/09/21/state-house-hearing-on-early-education-on-care/.

Finally, a handful of states have created new agencies with a specific mission focus on early childhood education. While this approach has the benefit of strategic coherence and commissioner-level leadership who can advocate for the field, new agencies often lack the political and financial clout of established agencies like departments of education (Early Learning Challenge Technical Assistance, 2015; Gomez, 2015; Regenstein & Lipper, 2013). Across all these models, there is wide variation in the extent to which decision making, policy development, and programmatic implementation is centralized or decentralized across regional or local entities.

Over the past 15 years most states have been moving toward greater alignment of administrative authority over statewide ECE systems to achieve improvements in quality, equity, and accountability. Despite these efforts there is scant empirical research on the effectiveness of different governance systems to achieve positive outcomes for young children and their families. Some studies have found that consolidation under one agency results in greater coordination, goal-oriented services, higher quality programming, and more subsidized supports available to families. Other studies have found that regional approaches to governance are more responsive to the needs of those it serves. Evidence suggests that regional councils and boards are more flexible and efficient because they do not have to navigate larger bureaucratic structures that are focused on carrying out statewide functions (Bennett, 2011; Gomez, 2015). In short, we just do not have the data we need to understand the effectiveness of our state systems of governance to support the long term health, care, and education of young children.

Much of the research on ECE systems integration is based on international studies. A primary distinction in high functioning international models of integrated ECE systems is that staffs across care and early education settings share the same educational requirements, professional standing, and professional wages as primary school teachers. It is clear that this exerts a powerful incentive to attract and retain a highly trained workforce capable of addressing the needs of diverse children and families. Comparative studies of integrated versus collaborative models in different cultural contexts have found that integrated approaches are associated with more positive outcomes for children (Bennett, 2011; Neuman, 2007). As Bennett (2011) observed, integrated approaches present opportunities for "(1) universal entitlement, (2) affordable access, (3) a unified and well educated workforce, (4) enhanced learning for all ages, and (5) smoother transitions for young children" across educational contexts (p. 4).

In 2005, Massachusetts became the first state to establish an independent agency with governance authority over the statewide early childhood education system. Under the

legislation early education and care has equal standing to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the Department of Higher Education within the Executive Office of Education. The new agency—known as the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC)—was developed through a consolidation of multiple ECE programs under the DESE's Early Learning Services Office and the Executive Office of Health and Human Services Office of Child Care Services. DEEC's primary statutory responsibilities include:

- Administration of a high quality system of public and private ECE;
- Development and implementation of Massachusetts's Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) program;
- Development and management of a school readiness assessment and comprehensive evaluation of ECE programs;
- Development of a workforce development system to support education, training, and compensation for educators (Bruner et al., 2004; Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, 2008).

Despite this consolidation, administration and oversight of key ECE programs linked to federal funding streams are divided across three agencies within two cabinet level offices. EEC has direct oversight over licensing and monitoring of ECE providers, the Head Start collaborative office, statewide UPK program, QRIS, and the state's early learning advisory council (ELAC). The agency is also responsible for administering federal grants, including RTT-ELC and the preschool development grants. DESE has primary responsibility over the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Section 619 that provides grants for special education services in preschool. IDEA Part C, serving infants and toddlers with developmental delays or other special needs and home visitation programs are administered by the Department of Public Health under the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (Early Learning Challenge Technical Assistance, 2015; Regenstein & Lipper, 2013).

A 2008 case study of the EEC conducted by the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy and Strategies for Children identified a number of accomplishments achieved by the agency. Observers felt the agency was able to build a strong infrastructure for more streamlined and efficient organizational operations and more consistent policy and regulatory efforts. The agency was also credited with consolidating waitlists and expanding access for low income families and families engaged with the Department of Social Services, and improving technology and data systems. A comprehensive review of regulatory standards for center-based and family child care led to a strengthening of standards based on a universal set of expectations for all program settings to ensure the health, safety, and developmental support

for all children. Finally, across the Commonwealth, awareness of the importance of early education was raised in both popular and political consciousness.

The study also identified a variety of challenges including concerns that it moved too slowly to initiate programs and get funding into the field to address professional development and implement the Commonwealth's UPK program. There were also concerns that the new staff did not reflect the field or have adequate early education experience to effectively manage a large scale governance effort. Most significant, the study outlined the long term challenge of agency leadership, both in terms of the role and position of the commissioner and the composition of the EEC board. Given Governor Romney's appointments at the time, many in the field felt that the leadership did not reflect the geographic or cultural diversity of the Commonwealth and were promoting the broader education agenda of the administration rather than the needs and values of the field.

With 10 years of governance under its belt, it is clear that EEC has accomplished much for the field and has elevated Massachusetts to a position of national leadership in early childhood education. Efforts to strengthen and align early learning and development standards, strengthen licensing and regulatory requirements, implement a tiered QRIS, and implement a workforce development strategy, including a new professional development delivery system, educator qualification requirements, career lattice, and professional registry are significant. Governor Patrick's Readiness Project, established in 2007, reinforced ECE role in broader education and workforce development goals for the state that mirrored national trends. Aligning these efforts to national education reform policies has made Massachusetts a primary recipient of federal grant dollars.[6]

Despite all the accomplishments of the EEC to build stronger early childhood systems across Massachusetts, we continue to lack actionable data on the impact of these systems and governance approaches on outcomes for children and families. It is also clear that the focus on standards and accountability has failed to improve working conditions, compensation, and professional opportunities for the workforce. If we feel strongly that a mixed-delivery system is valued and that children across public and private ECE settings, including home-based family child care deserve equivalent opportunities to high quality developmental and learning supports, then we need to invest adequate resources to support providers whether they work in a school or a community setting. We also need to ensure that higher education and workforce development systems support the workforce by providing the kind of programs we know work

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[6] In 2011 MA was awarded a $50 million federal Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Grant and in 2014 it received a $15 million federal Preschool Expansion Grant.

to help adult and nontraditional educators transition to and persistence in postsecondary education. Measures of system effectiveness must move beyond program/educator level indicators to address broader system functions, including:

- Family well-being (poverty, education, work)
- Health care and mental health
- Education and workforce development systems
- Compensation and career opportunities for professionals

Finally, we need to ensure that program standards align with the unique learning and developmental supports for young children that embrace the whole child rather than the narrower academic outcomes demanded by schools. While we continue to struggle with issues of quality standards, worker qualifications, learning standards and the most appropriate ways to assess the developmental and academic outcomes of young children, we need to understand that how we structure governance and oversight has a strong influence on the effectiveness of systems for children and families.

CONCLUSION

Education is often framed as a civil right. All children have an equal right to a quality education that provides the developmental and learning opportunities to succeed in life and contribute to society. However, like all civil rights, education is dependent upon civic responsibility and requires buy-in and engagement from all aspects of society to function effectively. Civil rights and civic obligations are linked and mutually supportive. Education, particularly of our youngest and most vulnerable children, is an objective value in which we all have a responsibility, we all have a stake, and we all are accountable. Too often we abdicate those responsibilities to others—government agencies, schools, educators—as the ones who are responsible for what we want our children to experience, learn and do. As a result, when social institutions fail to support our children, we feel helpless to address issues as a community and instead ask "who is accountable?"

We all have a role to play to ensure that all children have access to educational and developmental opportunities that excite, engage, educate, and empower. Yet, we have few mechanisms in place that give voice to our collective values of what we want our education system to be and what experiences we want our children to have. Over the past 20 years, efforts to build early education systems through alignment of policy and funding initiatives have driven our practices, standards, and compliance mandates toward increasingly narrow goals that are often disconnected from the realities of the field and the needs of children and families. Such myopic perspectives inhibit the adaptive capacity of the field and fail to support innovation, experimentation, and flexible strategies needed to govern complex systems.

After nearly six years of stagnant funding where the primary advocacy message was "preserve and protect" there is a renewed sense of opportunity that Massachusetts will begin to expand investments in early childhood education. Recent legislation filed in Massachusetts, including "An Act Ensuring High Quality Pre-Kindergarten Education," is renewing the debate about early education in the Commonwealth. If passed, the act would fund the expansion of high-quality Pre-k programs for 3- and 4-year olds in underperforming school districts. While these are important efforts, they reinforce the role of early education as a tool in education reform to ensure children are on track for success by the time they enter 3rd grade. Whether these initiatives help move the field forward or continue to exacerbate existing disconnects between policies and the realities of the field will largely be dependent upon the ability of EEC to exert its leadership and bring together diverse stakeholders who are engaged everyday with the care and learning of our youngest citizens.

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