

State and Territory Administrators Meeting (STAM 2013)

Opening Plenary Highlights

Alignment of ECE Programs: Helping More Children From Low-Income Families Access High-Quality Child Care

Linda K. Smith, Deputy Assistant Secretary and Inter-Departmental Liaison for Early Childhood Development, ACF

I'd like to welcome you to the 2013 State and Territory Administrators Meeting. It's an exciting time for early learning in our country. The agenda for this meeting is about aligning early care and education programs in this country, and the work that we're doing to promote better alignment between all of the systems, including the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services.

Kathleen Sebelius, Secretary, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

When children aren't safe and secure in a learning environment, they fall way too far behind. But there's a huge difference in their lifetime of achievement if they have social, emotional, and educational support in their earliest years, and you need all the pieces of the puzzle. Then you can really turn around those lives. We've already made historic investments that are really changing the course of early childhood intervention, especially around infants and toddlers.

Along with Secretary Duncan, we've kicked off a Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge, which raises the bar on quality across the range of early learning programs. And again, I think it will help us highlight best practices and try to spread that learning throughout the country. We know that more children are in child care settings than in any of the other programs combined.

We felt it was important to look at the framework around child care and in the spring proposed a new rule, which requires States to incorporate really what are common sense health and safety standards. Like background and fingerprint checks on providers and first aid and safe-sleep training for staff. I think the new rule goes a long way to strengthening parental choice, empowering parents with the information they need to make informed decisions about the care of their own children, and the rule would require that child care licensing information be available on a user-friendly public Web site.

But we can't think about this as access versus quality. It has to be access to quality. I know that they both take resources. I know that we have a balance between slots and how much quality improvement, but we're trying at every point along the way to make sure that we are recognizing that we have to have some set-asides for quality. That's got to be part of the funding stream; it can't just be about slots, but also I think we need to be able to provide more technical help and assistance. We need more child care providers to have access to good training programs and opportunities. I think people want to make sure that kids are in spaces where they are not only safe and socially and emotionally secure but are learning, and that means providing more opportunities to do that. So the more we can provide assets and

resources, I think this opportunity with your Early Head Start – Child Care Partnerships is just that. It's kind of lifting up a program and sharing those resources with far more teachers and far more kids.

Having Congress step up and help to fund this program means a massive new investment in States around the country in everything from home-visiting programs to early learning programs, to child care programs, to preK—and really a path to school readiness that we've never had before in this country for all of our kids. None of this works unless we have a trained and talented, better-paid, secure workforce.

Arne Duncan, Secretary, U.S. Department of Education

I don't know if we've ever had a chance with the President, with the head of HHS, with the Department of Education, all saying we need to dramatically—not incrementally—dramatically expand access to high-quality early learning opportunities. And we know for so many reasons why this is the right thing to do; let me just quickly talk about the cost if we don't do this. The cost I see is a dropout rate in this country of 25 percent. That's one out of four kids leaving our schools for our streets. We want to invest at unprecedented levels. The President's proposal talks about north of \$100 billion. This is not some Federal mandate. This is simply a partnership with States that are already investing.

So we have to start connecting the dots, and we have to do this in a bipartisan way. This should not be Republican versus Democrat. This is about strengthening children; this is about helping families; this is about growing our economy, this is about keeping more kids in school—7-to-1 return on investment, hard to beat that. This is the best investment in our children, in our country, we can make. For all the hard work all of you are doing, we don't begin to touch all the kids who need our efforts. So we need to work together and to put politics and ideology to the side. We need to dramatically expand access, and I'm convinced if we do this and do it in a thoughtful way, we change not just the course of children's and families' lives, we literally change the course of our Nation for generations to come. So a huge moment of opportunity but just doing a little bit more isn't going to get us where we need to go. We need to come together, and your leadership back home is so critically important.

The only way we get where we need to go is with a mixed-delivery system. So whether it's schools; whether it's nonprofits; whether it's for-profits; whether it's churches, community centers, YMCAs, boys and girls clubs, we want to go from about 1 million being served to 2 million children being served, and we need every one's best thinking; we need everyone at the table; we need to be thinking differently about facilities and resources and human capital. There is so much unmet need. We're not trying to add 10 kids or 50 kids or 1,000 kids. We're basically trying to double the number of children served, so everyone needs to be at the table. This has to be about quality for everybody; nobody gets a pass. If it's not quality, then we're wasting taxpayers' money, and we're not serving children well, and arguably, dramatically expanding access, 0–5, to high-quality, early childhood opportunities is the best gift we can give to the country. So I can't overstate the stakes and the opportunity here.

George Sheldon, Acting Assistant Secretary, ACF

As we begin to place more emphasis on the child in child care, we're going to be talking a lot about quality. Increasing quality and sustaining it is not cheap, and neither is it out of reach no matter what

the prophets of doom will tell you because it is more costly not to make that investment. As we work to create a sustainable financing structure that ensures capacity where it is needed most and quality for all, we're going to be talking about the child care workforce—what we can do together to ensure training and standards equal to that excellence and what we can do about a living wage for every child care worker in this country. And when we talk about excellence, we're going to talk a lot about streamlining monitoring so that what we monitor really is about quality. We need to be monitoring those things that actually make a difference in children's lives.

So the vision is simple—up the quality of child care across the board for every child in this country; increase our capacity to serve the most vulnerable of children; and do this in settings where the impact of adverse childhood experiences is understood, where the curriculum and the care include an awareness and ability to deal with toxic stress, and where trauma-informed care is the rule, not just the exception. But it will require collaboration. It will require all of us to be committed to building a better system, and it can and must be done.