

May 18, 2010

N.J. Council for Young Children
Att: Tonia Davis
100 Riverview Plaza
Trenton, N.J. 08611

RE: PUBLIC HEARING ON DRAFT OF 2010
STRATEGIC REPORT OF THE NEW JERSEY
COUNCIL FOR YOUNG CHILDREN, 5/21/10

Dear Council,

Thank you for this opportunity to provide input concerning your above referenced report. On behalf of the Melody Arons Center for Applied Preschool Research and Education, please accept our congratulations on a brilliant, thorough, and honest analysis of the status of New Jersey's young children, ages 0-8. Its candor, scholarship, and breadth provide New Jersey with a unique opportunity to improve the lives and education of all of our young children. Your concept of a "system of systems" is at the heart of both the difficulty and the hope of what you propose. Please consider the following points when finalizing your report:

1. Specification of all of the systems involved with early childhood care and education should be identified. Exactly how many systems, what they do, and who is on their committees remains largely unknown. This is especially important for funding purposes so that one hand knows what the other is doing. There is a strong impression that many of the same people sit on many of these seemingly different committees, so that what appears to be a complex web of agencies and organizations may, in fact, be many of the same people. Transparency is crucial for the success of the work your council proposes to do.
2. Most of your draft appears based upon Abbott results. A great deal of extra funding was available for the development and delivery of those programs. As you point out, there is little data on the other over 500 school districts. That means that you are, essentially, working in the dark and with little predictable funding. We suggest narrowing the scope of your expansive agenda to a few achievable outcomes across all regions of the state that would subsequently provide the foundation for further improvement and systemic change.
3. We view your Goals Two and Three (p. 6) to be inseparable. The current lack of service coordination at all levels is disastrous both for children, families, and the professionals who serve them. This, then, leads to little or no community level

infrastructure. In our experience, much of that infrastructure is provided by local churches through faith-based initiatives. This is not mentioned within your report and should be considered as an integral part of service delivery.

4. Parent outreach. Successful parent outreach has always been an unmet need in New Jersey, particular because of the diversity of cultures, races, and socio-economic circumstances. Old practices and techniques have failed. If a parent is to be engaged and remain engaged in the education and care of their child, our experience has been that the experience must be fun and rewarding for both. We use music, dance, and art as that connecting and motivating link, and recommend that new approaches be explored to further the parent outreach agenda item of the Council. The use of music to help improve the education of children living in poverty is currently in use in a variety of states, Harlem's Children's Zone, and involves the well known curriculum from Venezuela, El Sistema.

5. A common application procedure by which a parent can gain access to services should be available in every public school district, rather than a county agency. This makes it easy for the parent to obtain the information and also facilitates data collection.

6. The Council is charged with assuring "collaboration and coordination among the various early childhood programs in the state..." That is also the federal mandate for the SICC, the Interagency Coordinating Council under Part C of IDEA. A curious omission in the Council's report is no reference to the SICC. The sad state of this group is a compelling tale for this new Council. The current SICC membership shows vacancies in Personnel Preparation, Head Start, State Legislator, DDD, Division of Medical & Health Services, Department of Children and Families, the Mental Health Agency, and the Office of Homeless Children and Youth. You share a common member with the SICC in Celeste Andriot Wood. The challenge faced by your State Council is to surmount the interagency politics that have imploded the SICC. In order for your report to be complete, we believe some analysis is essential of the SICC as a forerunner of what you are trying to do, and how you will succeed when they have failed. Reference to their Part C State Performance Plan, updated 2/1/10, should also be included because of the overlap between your mission and theirs.

7. Create a cross walk of existing programs and learning standards. Inherent in this goal is also educational philosophy and methodology. Somehow, the Council needs to figure out how to establish a democratic dialogue that enables those with strong views to share them, but also to be tolerant of those with differing viewpoints. In special education we see the battles involving ABA and sensory integration, in addition to a variety of views on reading readiness, and developmental readiness. To date, professionals have been largely unable to work with those with whom they have philosophical disagreements, yet that becomes crucial if we are to create a truly statewide plan for young children.

8. We are in complete agreement with the recommendation that there needs to be a single early childhood governance structure. The only caution is that this design must consider an expansive definition of stakeholder, and welcome and encourage anyone who wishes to contribute. The current situation invites only those who are in receipt of public funding in some form to participate or provide input. Disagreement is discouraged and the availability of information is problematic. The diversity of New Jersey requires equal diversity of thought, experience and skill when it comes to formation of public policy.

9. Key among the issues involving children 0-5 is the option of a center-based program for ages 0-3. You have described various types in your report, such as day care or Head Start. However, there are no such options for Early Intervention. We suggest a configuration of services, again similar to Harlem's Children's Zone, where medical, educational, parent training, social, and after school programs are offered as part of a holistic approach that integrates all needed services into a "wrap-around" model that serves the whole child and family.

In closing, we wish to express our hope that your Council constitutes a new beginning in New Jersey's efforts to improve the lives and education of young children. If there is any way in which our Center can be of help or service, do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

Marilyn Arons, M.S.
Director

Cc: Board of Trustees
Executive Board