



Investing in the Future of L.A.’s Most At-Risk Children

High-Quality Early Care and Education and Its Impact on Young Children Involved with Los Angeles County’s Child Welfare and Probation Departments

Report and Recommendations Adopted by
the Los Angeles County Education Coordinating Council

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“Access to high-quality early education is particularly important for young children under the supervision of the child welfare system, 25 percent of whom are under the age of five, and the children of foster and probation youth. At a minimum, it has proven helpful in countering some of the traumatic and neglectful life experiences these children have endured. Perhaps even more important, it is a powerful tool for preventing further maltreatment and for ensuring positive, long-term benefits that include future academic and personal success.” (ECC’s *Expecting More: A Blueprint for Raising the Educational Achievement of Foster and Probation Youth*, p. 10)

Introduction

High-quality child care and development practices, whether provided in a setting that is formal (in child care centers, for example, or with family child care providers) or informal (with relative caregivers, neighbors, or friends) has long been touted as important to positive child development. Research through the years has documented the significant impact good-quality early care and education has on a child's cognitive and social-emotional development. Studies such as the High Scope/Perry Preschool Program, the Houston Parent-Child Development Center Project, and the Carolina Early Intervention Program have all documented the positive benefits for children participating in good-quality preschool programs.ⁱ Recent research on brain development further documents the importance of early experiences, demonstrating the negative long-term impact that toxic stresses may have on a child's nervous system, developing brain architecture, and physical and mental health.ⁱⁱ

Formal child care programs throughout the country are demonstrating their capacity to strengthen support systems and families to protect children in their homes and communities. Judy Langford, of the Strengthening Families Through Early Care and Education Project, has focused on building a prevention model using basic child development practices to strengthen families so that children are not removed from their homes.ⁱⁱⁱ

Good educational outcomes for all children begin with a solid foundation—one that includes a strong and healthy family, community, and educational system. Connecting children who are under the supervision of the child welfare or probation systems with high-quality and supportive early care and education programs is a powerful tool for laying that foundation.

The Los Angeles County Education Coordinating Council supports this important goal and is committed to ensuring that all children associated with the child welfare and probation systems participate in high-quality early care and education programs.

ECC Blueprint Goals and Activities

The Education Coordinating Council (ECC), established by the Board of Supervisors in November 2004, is charged with raising the educational achievement of youth involved with the child welfare and probation systems. Its 24 members represent the major stakeholders throughout Los Angeles County who are responsible for the educational performance of youth associated with these two systems, including the top leadership of school districts, county departments, the juvenile court, Los Angeles city and county children's commissions, advocacy groups, community-based organizations, and youth and their caregivers.

The ECC acknowledges the significant role that high-quality child care plays in education, family, and community support. In its long-term plan, *Expecting More: A Blueprint for Raising the*

Educational Achievement of Foster and Probation Youth, adopted by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors in February 2006, three goals are specific to the area of early care and education, and many activities have occurred around these goals in 2006–2007.

1. Higher numbers of children in the care of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), and the children of foster and probation youth, should be enrolled in high-quality early intervention, care, and education programs that are culturally and linguistically responsive.

- ⊗ Comprehensive information about Head Start, State Preschool, and general subsidized child care programs has been provided to DCFS managers and directors.
- ⊗ The Los Angeles County Policy Roundtable for Child Care launched the Steps to Excellence (STEP) quality rating system for child care programs in nine communities. This pilot initiative will help parents and caregivers more easily identify high-quality early care and education programs, and help raise the level of quality in child care programs throughout the county. The goal is to recruit over 600 licensed child care programs to participate in the STEP system pilot.
- ⊗ A pilot program for tiered reimbursement rates, based on the STEP quality rating system, has been developed and will be implemented at one of the county's ten Child Care Resource and Referral agencies in 2008. Those programs receiving higher ratings will receive higher reimbursements.
- ⊗ DCFS recently surveyed all its social workers to gather information about child care utilization rates, as well as barriers to its use. Survey results, available soon, will provide baseline data on the use of child care by families associated with DCFS.
- ⊗ The Special Needs Advisory Project (SNAP) provides technical assistance to child care providers serving young children with special needs. SNAP leadership is working to expand the focus of its efforts to more purposefully include children associated with the child welfare and probation systems

2. Community organizations and county departments should offer increased support and resources to parents, relative caregivers, and foster parents to help them be good nurturers and provide the positive learning environments that will ensure that their children are ready for school.

- ⊗ DCFS's Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project will work to achieve three goals: creating healthy communities to prevent child abuse and neglect before it occurs; creating strong families by increasing community connections for families who come to the attention of DCFS; and ensuring that children thrive by providing preventive services and activities to families with substantiated cases of maltreatment. These goals are intended to keep children safe from harm and prevent families from entering or re-entering the DCFS system.

- ⊗ First 5 LA recently approved the first stage of implementation for its Prenatal through Three focus area. Five demonstration communities will focus efforts around family engagement, data collection, workforce development, and sustainability to lay a foundation for transforming the environments that affect good early childhood development.
- ⊗ Participants in the Los Angeles/Tel Aviv Partnership Child Welfare Project travel to Tel Aviv in October 2007 to learn more about the Israeli model for integrating early childhood education and child welfare services that so impressed last year's delegation. The goal in Los Angeles County is to build on what Tel Aviv is doing so successfully, incorporating early childhood education and family support as a primary option in developing plans for families with young children who are known to DCFS.

3. Families, caregivers, and agency staff should pay greater attention to preparing DCFS and probation children and youth for transitions to preschool, elementary school, middle school, high school, adult education, vocational school, college, and employment, and for transfers between schools.

- ⊗ In the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the Ready for School Program is partnering with schools, local communities, parents, families, and community organizations to operate nine school readiness centers within the district. Through these centers, LAUSD is attempting to create and sustain a cohesive and inclusive school readiness support system for children from birth to age five and their families by focusing on better family functioning, child development, and health, plus an improved system of care.
- ⊗ Los Angeles Universal Preschool (LAUP) is planning an initiative targeting young children associated with DCFS, to increase their numbers in LAUP programs.

Systems Integration: A Key Component

Key to the success of these ECC goals is the coordination and integration of the child welfare and probation systems with early care and education. These three systems have evolved independently over the years, based on their own individual policies, funding criteria, and political mandates. As a result, Los Angeles has three disparate systems, each with different and sometimes confusing rules and regulations that must be navigated separately. Current challenges to integrating and coordinating these systems include the following points:

- The words we use are important. In these three systems, similar terminology (*providers, caregivers*, and so on) often refers to different populations or procedures. As a result, when professionals from different systems come together, they frequently talk at cross-purposes about different populations, services, or regulations. For professionals, this confusion is frustrating, but for families who must maneuver the system or simply access a service, it is threatening and potentially harmful.

- The history of the probation, child welfare, and child care systems reflects the differences in how and to whom services are rendered. For example, children associated with the child welfare system automatically qualify for services offered under the child welfare umbrella because they have an association with DCFS. Under the state's subsidized child care system, however, services are not automatic and are instead based on an adult's need for child care. The subsidized child care system has evolved throughout the years not in response to a child's need for a safe, nurturing, healthy place to grow and develop, but to workforce demands and priorities.
- Few opportunities exist for professionals, policymakers, and advocates to share common experiences, explore opportunities to work together, and understand the intricacies of the various systems. Groups throughout the county—such as child care planning committees, children's services organizations, and child welfare agencies—may work together around specific issues, but few have participation across systems.
- Limited funds, restricted access to resources, and a growing need for social and children's services have contributed to an environment that sometimes encourages suspicion and competition, rather than cooperation, collaboration, and service integration.

Although these barriers and system challenges can be daunting, they must not undermine what years of research have already demonstrated: good-quality early care and education programs support healthy social and emotional development in young children, and families are strengthened and supported by these services.

A Unified Strategy: Recommendations for an Initiative

With its membership's commitment to positive educational outcomes for children associated with the child welfare and probation systems, the Education Coordinating Council can play a critical role in reducing child maltreatment by increasing the enrollment of young system children in early care and education programs, and by putting in place a model of child protection that uses the child care facility as a focal point for children and their families.

The Center for the Study of Social Policy's Strengthening Families Through Early Care and Education initiative is a national model for the prevention of child abuse and neglect that builds on the foundations of high-quality early care and education and the unique relationship parents have with their caregivers. It fosters the necessary connections between the systems of early care and education and the child welfare system, so a coordinated effort can build protections for children within their homes and communities.

Many of the components for the implementation of a similar initiative already exist in some form. **What Los Angeles County needs is a unified strategy that brings together the key systems that serve young children under the age of five.** With that in mind, the Education Coordinating Council adopted this recommendation in October 2007:

The ECC should convene key stakeholders to design an integrated, countywide early childhood education/child welfare/probation initiative that honors current efforts and includes a focus on strengthening families. This work group should include, at a minimum: the departments of Children and Family Services, Probation, Mental Health, and Public Health, the Chief Executive Office's Office of Child Care, First 5 LA, the Los Angeles Unified School District, and the Association of Community Human Service Agencies.

The following elements must be part of any initiative of this kind:

- **The initiative should ensure that all children from birth to age five, starting with those under the supervision of county departments, have the opportunity to participate in high-quality child development programs.**

Los Angeles County has many model programs, services, and systems to build upon, but it also faces unique strengths and challenges. A comprehensive system of child care and development services must be built that is developmentally appropriate, family-centered, and specifically designed to meet the needs of all families. Many current initiatives in Los Angeles County are targeted to particular age groups (those that serve families with children under the age of three, for example, and those designed to prepare three- to five-year-olds for school). As a result, a seamless system of comprehensive child development services must be created that not only crosses systems, but also crosses age groupings.

The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) used its existing Head Start and high-quality preschool programs to implement a school readiness initiative that aimed for 100 percent enrollment of three- to five-year-olds under the supervision of the IDCFS in a high-quality early care and education program (full- or part-time) within one year. It also emphasized stable educational placements for as long as possible, and worked to assist children with transitions out of and into new programs, when necessary. The IDCFS reported that by the end of its implementation year, approximately half the three- to five-year-old wards were enrolled in high-quality preschool programs. Building on this success, the IDCFS is now initiating additional efforts to ensure that all young children under the age of three who are associated with the child welfare system have participated in child development services that recognize the importance of attachment relationships and the impact of trauma in the first three years of a child's life.

The ECC should use the Illinois model as a framework to develop a comprehensive child development initiative for young children associated with Los Angeles County's child welfare and probation systems.

- **Representatives of existing systems should be asked to commit to building this initiative through a formal agreement.**

Creating and adopting a unified strategy for integrating the three systems does not require building new structures or developing new programs. It does, however, require the leadership of ECC members to bring these systems together and to effectively tackle the nuts and bolts of each, so that a unified plan to link DCFS children and the children of foster and probation youth with early care and education services can be developed.

- **Policy changes and investments must be sought to provide public and private agencies with the flexibility they need to blend services and funding for these children, and to provide additional resources to expand high-quality child care services.**

Integrating three complex systems with unique histories, cultures, and regulations will require changes in current policies. Many existing rules and regulations were established to serve specific populations with finite resources, and do not take into consideration the special circumstances associated with DCFS children or the children of DCFS and probation youth.

For instance, prospective parents are currently prohibited from enrolling in the county's Centralized Eligibility List (CEL) for state-subsidized child care services until after their babies are born. This ensures that children are enrolled as spaces become available and that programs can fill their openings in a timely manner. Since over 33,000 children under the age of five are already on the CEL, this makes sense.^{iv} However, with such competition for subsidized child care, a waiver for pregnant teens under the supervision of Probation or DCFS could provide them greater opportunities to access subsidized child care services when their children are born.

Competition for limited resources, varied regulations, and different service cultures in Los Angeles reflect the area's severe shortage of high-quality early care and education programs. With so many children waiting for subsidized child care services, any effort limited to maximizing our available resources will not be enough to ensure that all young children associated with the child welfare and probation systems have access to or are enrolled in good-quality child care. It is essential that organizations throughout the county join together to shape and implement a policy agenda to advocate for *additional* child care resources to support all our families and their children.

- **County departments, First 5 LA, and other agencies should be engaged in developing a marketing and information strategy that specifically targets individuals, professionals, parents, and caregivers associated with system youth.**

Informing parents, caregivers, and professionals working in the child welfare and probation systems about the dramatic impact a good-quality early childhood program has on young children is integral to building a unified strategy that focuses on the benefits of early care and education for children under the age of five. Existing networks such as the California Department of Education-funded Child Care Resource and Referral agencies can be used to provide information to parents, caregivers, social workers, probation officers, and others about the

available options for young children, so that families have greater access to, and higher rates of enrollment in, high-quality early care and education programs like Head Start, State Pre-school, LAUP, STEP programs, and NAEYC-accredited programs.

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