

## **Congressional Statement on Oklahoma's Early Childhood System**

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Thank you Chairman Cole, Ranking Member DeLauro, and Members of the Committee for the invitation to discuss early childhood education in Oklahoma and how Oklahoma and the federal government can strengthen the quality and availability of early childhood opportunities.

Oklahoma is fortunate to have leaders in our state who have long recognized that in order to achieve economic prosperity we must begin with our youngest citizens. During the late 1990's, simultaneous efforts occurred to pioneer universal pre-kindergarten, state-wide home visiting programs and child care quality rating systems. Oklahoma is a model for today's federal early childhood agenda.

Your committee is considering appropriations on **Early Childhood Education and Care – Administration for Children and Families (ACF)** to increase the Child Care and Development Block Grant in order to improve the quality and safety of infant and toddler care and to expand Early Head Start. In Oklahoma, infants, toddlers, and three-year-olds comprise 44% of all children receiving child care assistance, and represent the majority of children who participate in year round, full-day care. In 1998, Oklahoma was the first to implement a statewide quality rating and improvement system. Child care centers and homes that meet the highest quality levels are reimbursed at higher rates. Quality is important and it is expensive. Effective quality standards need to be identified to ensure the investment in quality yields positive outcomes for children. The federal government can support states such as Oklahoma to identify outcomes for children who participate in

high quality programs, and provide adequate funding to providers to support the implementation of high quality standards.

Pre-kindergarten programs in Oklahoma are considered a grade in the public school system and are allocated funds based on the State Aid Formula, which takes into account disability and financial need. In FY14, the \$313 million allocated for pre-kindergarten programs was comprised of 47% state, 41% local and 12% federal funds. Increases in **Department of Education** funding for **Title I** and **Special Education** being considered by the committee will support Oklahoma in offering high quality pre-kindergarten programs.

Oklahoma did not apply for the Preschool Development Grant, however federal support to states for preschool programs in the form of a block could improve our ability reach at-risk three- and four-year-old children that universal pre-kindergarten may not be serving. Expanded partnerships are being explored between public schools, child care and Head Start programs to expand quality early learning opportunities. The recent reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant also creates opportunities for greater flexibility in Oklahoma to expand these partnerships.

Early childhood in Oklahoma represents an array of services provided throughout a child's early years. Here is an example of two children who are completing their first year of kindergarten. Both were born to single teenage mothers who had not completed high school. The first child's mother received home visiting services, ensuring adequate prenatal care and delivered a healthy baby. Because this mother received coaching on providing positive parenting skills, the baby was talked to, read to and mother and child

developed a strong attachment. While this mother completed high school and job training, her child was cared for in a safe environment by well-trained providers with opportunities for play and development. The child received regular health and developmental screenings. At age four this child was enrolled in a pre-kindergarten program, and she was healthy and ready to participate. Upon kindergarten entry she was prepared, eager and excited to begin school.

The second child's mother did not receive adequate prenatal care or supports and her baby was born prematurely. This mother returned to a minimum wage job two weeks after her baby was born, she struggled with depression, and worked long hours. Her baby was fussy and lagged behind on developmental milestones. This child stayed at a neighbor's apartment while her mother worked. The mother's job made it difficult to get her child to a preschool program and she lacked information about what programs were available. When this child enters kindergarten, she's scared, withdrawn, starts out behind, and is not able to keep up with her peers. By the end of the kindergarten year, the first child is ready for first grade, and the second child will repeat kindergarten.

Unfortunately, by the end of kindergarten, we are not able to connect the different experiences each child had with her subsequent school success or challenges. Oklahoma is proud of its accomplishments, but unfortunately, we are not able to brag about our outcomes. Accountability is an important next step on our journey to building a strong early childhood system in Oklahoma. We are encouraged by efforts at the federal level to build partnership across programs and look forward to continued support to ensure that all children have opportunities for the best possible beginning.