

Steven Dow
Executive Director, CAP Tulsa
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Education and Related Agencies
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Chairman Cole, Ranking Member DeLauro, and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for having this hearing on early childhood, for giving me the opportunity to appear in front of you, and for your strong support of investing federal funds in our nation's youngest and most at-risk children.

For the last 25 years, I have served as the Executive Director of CAP Tulsa, a community action agency focused on interrupting the cycle of poverty by providing high-quality early education services to young children and a range of family supports aimed at improving the economic condition of their parents.

I have the good fortune of doing my work in one of country's most well-resourced environments for early education, a fiscally and socially conservative place in which there is strong bipartisan support for investing state tax dollars and private philanthropy alongside federal funds to prepare our youngest, most vulnerable children for life success.

Nearly twenty years ago, cognizant of the unfortunate fact that the achievement gap that is manifest at the time of kindergarten school entry only widens as children get older – despite decades of K-12 common education reform efforts – we in Oklahoma set out to develop a different kind of educational reform strategy – one that focused on narrowing, if not trying to eliminate entirely, the achievement gap BEFORE the time children entered kindergarten by enacting state-funded universal pre-k for 4 year olds and incentivizing improvements in the quality of child care by creating a tiered reimbursement system in which providers offering higher-quality care were paid higher rates.

As state leaders became increasingly aware of the critical birth-three period and the grossly inadequate levels of federal Early Head Start funding and acute shortage of childcare availability for the youngest children, the state created a public-private partnership to raise the quality and expand the supply of high-quality infant and toddler care.

As a result of the combined federal, state, local, and unprecedented level of private philanthropy from the George Kaiser Family Foundation, we have had the unique opportunity to design, operate, evaluate, and continuously improve a scaled system of exceptionally high quality early education for Tulsa's youngest, most vulnerable children, including both home visiting and center based care.

So, what are the lessons learned from and how can the Tulsa experience teach the country and

inform efforts at the federal level? Perhaps most crucially, our experience validates that high-quality early childhood education for economically-disadvantaged children starting at birth and continuing through pre-school is a twofer -- preparing children to enter the public school system prepared for kindergarten, school, and lifelong success and supporting their parents in the low-wage labor market working towards economic self-sufficiency.

Numerous studies by Georgetown University researchers have documented the substantial gains that children make during our Head Start program, and their most recently published research found that children participating in the Head Start program for only one year had positive results through middle school – they scored higher on state math tests and were significantly less likely to repeat a grade or be chronically absent from school than similar students who did not attend Head Start.

Another group of researchers looking at our Career Advance program that prepares the parents of children in our program for employment in the health care sector have reported early findings which provide strong evidence that pairing high-quality Head Start services with job training for parents produces positive outcomes for parents and children beyond the benefits of Head Start alone.

Beyond that, five lessons from our experience can help inform this committee's work:

First, to produce the strong outcomes, providers must be able to hire and retain skilled teachers and staff. Both for us and for programs across the country, teacher salaries account for most of program operating budgets and yet, due to inadequate federal funding, the prevailing wages in the field are too low to attract and retain quality teachers. As the National Academy of Sciences noted in 2015 in its seminal report calling for a transformation of the early childhood workforce: "Persisting with the status quo for the professionals who do this important, complex work will perpetuate today's fragmented approach to the care and education of young children, resulting in inadequate learning and development, especially among America's most vulnerable families and communities." In Tulsa, we evidence our commitment to early learning by compensating all Head Start and Early Head Start teachers with salaries commensurate with what they could earn as public school teachers. To mirror the Tulsa success, significant federal investment in building the early childhood workforce is essential and is urgently needed.

Second, early childhood operators like CAP are improving results and access for children by coordinating with local schools and combining existing state and local funding streams to leverage federal resources. By working closely with state and local policymakers, we increase the impact of federal funds and influence state and local policies to support children and families. It supports our efforts when federal funding is strong, includes quality standards like those in Head Start and Early Head Start, and increases with rising needs. It hinders our efforts when federal funding streams are limited or declining and do not meet needs.

Third, existing levels of federal funding provided by Head Start, Early Head Start, Child Care

Development Block Grant, and Home Visiting Program are crucial, yet not sufficient on their own to cover the costs of high-quality services nor to reach the long waiting lists of children and parents who need them. Tulsa is an anomaly with the George Kaiser Family Foundation committing millions of private dollars annually to our local efforts and leveraging federal support; but the fate of low-income children and families across the country ought not depend on the presence and benevolence of private philanthropy. Additional federal funds are desperately needed to provide adequately for the full needs of existing children and parents enrolled in the programs, lengthen the number of hours and days that child attend, and to reach the long waiting lists of children and parents who qualify for the programs.

Fourth, despite all the successes we are so proud of, it is important to highlight that early childhood education alone--even starting at birth and continuing throughout the preschool years--is not a silver bullet. It must be followed by high-quality early elementary school education in order to maintain and build upon the foundation established and gains achieved in early education. In addition, it is crucial to meet parents' needs since children do better when families have stable income and parents are able to make ends meet with less stress. Child care while parents work is a crucial part of meeting parents' needs as well as children's, so it is important for Congress to reverse the trend of fewer and fewer families getting help paying for child care as a result of declining funding from core federal programs -- in 2015, 373,000 fewer children received child care assistance than in 2006. In addition, investments in such areas as post-secondary education and workforce training, along with help for parents to meet basic needs such as health ,housing and nutrition are key to long-term success.

Fifth and finally, early care and education is a common sense, fiscally conservative, high leverage and high return investment embraced across party lines and among people with diverse perspectives. Legislators, policy makers, philanthropists, businesses, religious leaders, law enforcement, parents, educators, advocates, child development experts, scientists, and labor market economists, among many others have come together to lead progress for children. It is hard to find any other area of public policy in which such widespread agreement about the value and importance of federal government funding, leadership and support exists.

Let me conclude by quoting the words of a CAP mom, a victim of domestic violence with two young sons who is training to be a dental assistant in our CareerAdvance program: "I was a broken shell of a person, my identity stripped from me, I felt like a failure, but I knew I needed to start looking for work. Thanks to CAP I was able to find a wonderful therapist for my oldest son, who suffers from PTSD. The family support specialist helped me get a bed when my children and I were able to get an apartment, so I had a place to sleep. Then my youngest, who has a sensory processing disorder, has such amazing teachers who work with him and help him overcome obstacles when a average child his age would have no problems. I am no longer that single mom, who was broken, insecure and unsure of who I was as a person. I stand before you today as a proud mom, a proud student, a future dental assistant, and I hold my head high. I am no longer a victim of my past, but a victor of my future."

Thank you.

Steven Dow
Executive Director
CAP Tulsa
4606 S. Garnett, Suite 100
Tulsa, OK 74146
918.382.3217 (work)
918.629.3645 (cell)
sdow@captulsa.org
www.captulsa.org