

Making a Difference in the Lives of Young Children: Building A System for All Children

Phoenix, AZ

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Thank you, Rhian and Steve, for this opportunity to be in Arizona and to speak to the people who are making a real difference for young children and their families in your state, in spite of many challenges. To be with community builders and I want you to know how much I value the time I will spend with you and hope that I have a chance to hear from many of you about the work you're doing. Thank you for your commitment and pioneer spirit in your communities.

My topic today is "Making a Difference in the Lives of Young Children: by Building a System that Supports All Children." I want to review a few reasons that I believe a systematic, unified approach is required; I will share some lessons learned in my own state and others; and I hope to challenge you to move swiftly and thoughtfully to achieve results for AZ's children.

Let's begin by celebrating the movement for children that is taking place across our nation. 10-15 years ago, you had to look hard to find any major statewide efforts for young children and efforts to create early childhood systems didn't exist. And most states didn't recognize nor understand the importance of and communities and the vital role they play in building those systems.

Things are different now. At the federal level and in most states, there are major efforts underway and significant funding brought to bear in order to create comprehensive systems for young children. Almost every state is involved in some level of system planning. Your work and your success are part of the national movement and believe me, the nation is watching to see and learn from your progress. First Things First is one of the hallmark ECE programs in the nation and everyone who cares about young children and their families is carefully observing to see what happens next in AZ! The stakes are high for your work. Congratulations on all that you have done, which I believe is just the beginning!

States like yours and mine had to begin with what we knew in building an early childhood foundation. And now most of the successful early childhood studies and program implementation efforts that are in place have agreed on three basic things:

- 1. Learning begins at birth. A child enters the world completely helpless and dependent on those around her to provide for her every need. And every child is born ready to learn. The first years are when the capacity to learn is strengthened. That foundation will then shape every learning experience that follows. This window of opportunity when we can make the greatest impact exists for a relatively short time. Those early moments and days are the ones we must protect, nurture and enhance.**
- 2. The old financial models are right—investment on the front end offers the highest rate of return, and not investing adequately up front has a higher price later on. You know the scientific studies that demonstrate an actual dollar, as high as 17 to 1,**

when a child is able to participate in high quality early learning environments. The Rand Corporation released a study for the state of California and determined that any investments of public monies would pay for themselves by the time a child reached middle school. It's hard to argue with that rate of return on investment, particularly in these challenging financial times.

3. The 3rd consideration for our decisions is that proof of our efforts is in the lasting, long-term results. No single test can determine how successful an education policy or program is, which is unfortunate since our entire economic future depends on our ability to have children who can and will, be lifelong learners. But we can't wait a generation and see if it worked, we must act wisely with what we know, and act now. We must be willing to base our policies, programs and practices on sound research, continue to reassess our results and our methods, and reallocate our resources accordingly.

Why do EC systems matter?

I think of a system of early learning as an organized network of programs and services working together to meet the needs of all young children. The programs and services don't necessarily have to live together or be in the same agency to be a system. And it takes a lot of communication and joint decision-making to keep all the parts together and moving the early childhood agenda forward.

Why does it matter? Why shouldn't we keep creating programs that meet the needs of some children some of the time and not worry

about effectiveness and accountability and the children who don't knock on our doors for services?

- 1. Get results for the children of AZ. If your system doesn't include all children, you won't be able to account for all of them. And including all children doesn't mean you don't prioritize based on levels of need and available funding.**
- 2. Affecting school readiness requires a comprehensive approach and involvement from all sectors, including health, mental health, family involvement, early care and education, higher education, faith communities, business, the media and many others. School readiness is affected by so many different things, beginning first with families and impacted by many sub-systems. When we integrate our strategies and services, we better serve young children and their families.**
- 3. We need a system because sometimes the children who don't come to us for services are the most in need of high quality early education and health services and family support. A system that uses population data to make decisions can best identify the children at greatest risk and offer intervention at the most optimum time.**
- 4. A systems approach allows us to maximize the resources, including multiple funding streams with their own regulations and requirements. We talk about and wish for funding without strings but those strings are there for a reason and it's usually to protect vulnerable populations. A well organized system allows us to use funding more effectively and maximize its potential to serve the most children possible.**

5. Current services are both market based and government financed and both public and private issues must be addressed. The financing of early care and education services has not happened in a thoughtful, organized way. We've done great work on a shoestring and added programs and services as we could. Services are paid for with federal, state and local funds and a large amount is paid by private sources (parent fees, as well as private donations from businesses and foundations).

Having an inter-related system allows for the blending and braiding of funding streams to enable more flexible use of money to serve the largest numbers of children and families possible. Funding streams are complicated and a well developed system allows you to make the best decisions about which child should be served with which dollars.

6. A system allows service providers to develop consistent integrated policies to better serve children and families. A unified system creates a mechanism for accountability to demonstrate outcomes for children and their families as well as quality standards for programs and services and ease of access and understanding for families.

What can we learn from others and each other about successful community work on behalf of young children?

1. Members of successful community coalitions/regional councils take the time to learn about children...the basics of how they develop and what they need. When I first began my job as president of SS, I used every board meeting to educate board members about how young children think and learn. Not because they didn't love children and want to help them. But simply because young children think and

learn differently from older children/adults and we need to be knowledgeable about their development. I really wanted the governing board to understand why classrooms need to be organized for active learning and why teachers need to be trained to be facilitators of learning; and why young children don't learn best when they are required to sit still and be quiet! This knowledge affects decision making! Take the time to learn and help those around you to better understand children and what they need!

2. Members of successful coalitions/councils respect and acknowledge families as the most important influences in children's lives and make policy decisions that help families be successful. These decisions may range from having enough high quality child care so that families have good choices....to having a medical home available for every child so that there is consistency in their medical care. They include understanding that some families need support at very challenging times and other families need intensive support more of the time to be able to function well and that the intensity of services must be based on family needs.

3. Successful coalitions recognize cultural differences in families and respect those differences and value their benefits. As I said in another meeting here in AZ recently, I'm not talking about foods, fashions and festivals. I'm talking about assuring that your programs, strategies and services match the needs and offer the support to the families in your communities. And that you welcome and celebrate the broad range of diversity of children, families and coalition members that exists in your state. The reception last night in the beautiful gallery of Native American art served to remind me again of the very rich cultural heritage that exists in your beautiful state.

4. Successful coalitions know that true collaboration is based on positive relationships and work to build and invest in relationships across the community. I'm sure you have discovered that people think differently about what you should do to help children and support families. But don't cut folks out because they have more conservative or liberal ideas than you do. The best decisions are those that are discussed openly with everyone listening and learning and everyone contributing, which leads to making better informed decisions

5. Successful coalitions are not afraid to lead because leadership matters! The opportunity I've had recently to work in AZ has allowed me to learn more about the strong, committed leadership here and it is very impressive. Your state benefits greatly from outstanding state program, policy and political leaders and strong community leaders. And neither level is less important than the other. Successful statewide EC efforts that have survived and thrived over time have strong, effective oversight and accountability measures in place and are able as to demonstrate statewide results. The work you will be involved in here at the Summit, the job of prioritizing, is an example of your response to oversight and commitment to accountability. We've all seen many efforts come and go that didn't have strong accountability measures and couldn't demonstrate statewide results. And this is where leadership matters. Of course our lives would be easier if we didn't have to follow any guidelines and rules but they are in place to assure results and it is in the best interest of children that we succeed over the long haul. Good leaders step up and help their communities understand why these things are important and are not afraid to take an unpopular stand if it is in the best, long-term interest of young children. Continue to be that kind of leader for children.

6. The most successful efforts include both a state-down and a community up approach. The communities' roles are to identify needs, build awareness for those needs and to be accountable for serving the children and families. The state should collect data, provide funding to address the needs and hold communities accountable for getting results for children and families. It's the push-and-pull between the state and communities that builds the momentum needed to serve children and families well. The state and community roles are different. And whether you're working from the community level or the state level, children are best served when each level understands and respects the differing needs, goals and approaches of the other. We are truly better together!

7. Strong coalitions are highly accountable for all public and private funding. It only takes a small misstep in handling funds to turn the public against your work. So put in place the systems that are needed to be fully accountable for all of your funding whether it comes from hard-working families or from tax payers pockets or from private sources....and stay visible and transparent.

8. Successful coalitions care about quality in all settings for all children, especially vulnerable children. Simply, quality matters! And when children are served to a level that meets their developmental needs, it doesn't matter where they are served.... Pre-K, Head Start, child care center, family child care homes....research has proved that it's not the setting, it's what happens in that setting that makes the

difference. Our goal should be to have one system with the same basic expectations for all programs regardless of their setting!

Quality not only matters, it costs more and is worth the cost in benefits to children. I want to give you an example of what happened in my state when a quality improvement and rating system was put in place and financial supports were provided. Before the system, less than 20% of our children were in high quality care. Today, 80% are in 3, 4 and 5 star rated programs and 78% of our poor children are in 4 and 5 star programs, our highest rated programs. And the system has infused the local programs with significantly more money to pay for the higher quality. We must invest in higher quality if we are going to provide solid foundations for all young children.

9.And finally, successful coalitions educate and advocate on behalf of young children every day in every way, both formally and informally. These coalitions learn all they can; you don't have to have an EC degree to be very knowledgeable about young children but you do have to educate yourselves and stay on the cutting edge of research; and educate everyone about the importance of the early years and how everyone can make a difference....in our homes, in the grocery store, at that little tots game..and yes, with your legislators and other policy makers. And when policy decisions arise that affect the well-being of young children, you have to be willing to stand up and speak out.

Young children can't vote and cannot advocate for themselves and their own needs. It is our job to advocate for them. And every single person here today who cares about young children, must commit to it as your ongoing job.

I want to call for a sense of urgency and action on behalf of young children. Many children are in trouble and will not thrive if we don't act! Infants and toddlers are in crisis. More than any other age cohort, they are the most likely to be spending their days/and nights in low quality care situations. As states have garnered more resources for 4 year olds, infants and toddlers have not had that same support and some states have lost ground. Care is expensive for infants and toddlers...you need more adults to give them the one on one care that is critical to meet their bonding and attachment needs. We MUST do better in this area of our work!

We don't know the world that we are preparing young children to face in the future. But we do know that there are some critical adaptive skills and abilities that allow adults to function, adapt and thrive....things like creativity, the ability to be flexible and adjust to change; a strong sense of self; a healthy respect for others, regardless of class, culture or station in life; and intelligence, to name a few....Each one of these is grounded in the earliest days and years of life...and we have a responsibility and I believe you have the commitment to provide the structures and services necessary to help all young children develop these skills and abilities. This commitment will require a continuing investment of time, talent and treasure.

I believe you are at a crossroads. You have engaged your communities and regions as never before. You have worked hard to develop the infrastructure to build a high quality early education system for your state. And you're ready to expand services and measure your impact. There are decisions coming up that will affect

your ability to move forward or fall behind. I believe your collective work and advocacy will be the deciding factor.

So, I challenge you to do what is needed to assure the best results for children in your region and your state. You know the needs, you have the passion, and the future is in your hands.

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