

# Position Paper

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## On behalf of:

The Alaska Head Start Association:

Membership organization dedicated to meeting the needs of Head Start children and their families in Alaska.

## Endorsed by:

Fairbanks Association for Education of Young Children:

Membership organization serving and acting on behalf of the needs and rights of all the children ages 0-12 years, with special emphasis on developmental and educational services and resources and fostering the growth and development of the membership in their work with, and on behalf of, young children.

## Development and Implementation of a Voluntary Pre-K in Alaska

The development and implementation of a voluntary Pre-K in Alaska is critical for the continued economic success of our state. In addition, reliable research demonstrates that quality early childhood programs, such as Head Start, are effective as part of a smart workforce development strategy and as anti-poverty tools.<sup>i</sup> Early childhood education and child care play a critical, measurable role in Alaska's economy. Alaskans across the state place a high priority on state funding for early education and child care. Alaska is one of only 10 states without a state-funded, statewide early childhood education system.<sup>ii</sup> Assurance of a high quality, developmentally and culturally appropriate preschool experience should be the foundation from which Alaska's Pre-K programs are developed. Pre-K programs are best implemented in the context of relationships and collaborations with other preschool and child care programs and in conjunction with statewide early learning systems.

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### Statement #1:

One common misunderstanding is that an appropriate preschool educational approach is similar to the education of children K-12. In reflecting upon all that we know about young children, how they think and learn, we have found there are four characteristics that are of the utmost

importance for educators and that underlie much of what we believe is best for preschool children.

1. Young children are theory builders.
2. Young children need to build a foundation of physical knowledge.
3. As they mature, young children become increasingly autonomous and independent, both intellectually and morally.
4. Young children are social beings, influenced by and influencing others around them<sup>iii</sup>

This approach requires that young child's educational experiences emphasize the construction of knowledge, not its transmission.<sup>iv</sup> Transmission of knowledge is a frequent occurrence in the practice of public education. Constructivist educational settings provide the context in which the learner constructs knowledge-contexts that encourage self-direction, experimentation, problem solving and social interaction. When comparing the readiness and qualifications of teachers in classroom settings, the preschool environment requires a specific skill set that is not adequately taught in a typical Educational Degree program. Preschool education requires teachers to have a high degree of competency in the areas of social-emotional development, group management, constructivist theory and practice as well as family development. A thorough understanding of developmental stages of children, birth-five, is predicated on nurturing and meaningful relationships between child and teacher and therefore academic success.

Our recommendation:

- Ensure that teachers selected for Pre-K programs have an adequate Early Childhood education. At minimum teachers should have education in the areas of: child development, course work that focuses on children birth-preschool years as well as social-emotional development, constructivist and group management practices.
- Ensure the Pre-K setting reflects the constructivist approach to learning in curriculum development and the learning environment, as well as the teacher's disposition.

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## **Statement #2:**

Head Start represents our country's best effort to develop a nationwide, comprehensive program for economically disadvantaged young children and their families. In 44 years, Head Start has improved the lives of millions of children and families, expanded our knowledge of how to best serve these children and families, and developed a proven approach for delivering cost-effective services. Head Start is widely recognized as a successful comprehensive program.

The Head Start approach to working with children and families provides a foundation upon which

to expand early education and childcare. The lessons and expertise drawn from 44 years of operation make Head Start and local Head Start programs invaluable ingredients in the expansion of quality services for children and families. We believe that the need for Early Childhood Education in our state far exceeds what our existing systems provide. However, the state has a responsibility to ensure that all publicly funded systems, existing and new, are working together to provide services in a coordinated and complementary manner. Written agreements addressing eligibility, enrollment, and recruitment need to be in place between all early childhood systems providing services.

Not only are coordinated and complementary services a good idea they are federally mandated:

In accordance with Section 642(e)(5) of the Head Start Act, Head Start agencies (grantees) are required, no later than December 12, 2008, to enter into a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the appropriate local entity responsible for managing publicly funded preschool (pre-kindergarten) programs in their service area.

Many states have designated local entities to be responsible for managing publicly funded preschool programs. These include local educational agencies (LEAs), and in some cases city and county governmental agencies. Head Start agencies should identify and work with the appropriate LEA, city or county agency to either expand the scope of processes and agreements already in place or to develop new processes that will result in an MOU(s). In either case, the MOU(s) must include coordination plans that address the ten subjects described in Section 642(e)(5)(A) of the Act.

The primary focus of Pre-K programs, across the nation, has been the preparation of children for Kindergarten. For many years Head Start programs, across the state of Alaska, have provided comprehensive services to children and families far beyond provision of quality early childhood education. Head Start provides services that include developmental, health, mental health screenings, referrals and education that have greatly enhanced the quality of life for children and families that persistently hover at or below the poverty line. Head Start services also include a family development approach that ensures referral to community resources as well as teaching parents the importance of goal setting and active involvement in their child's education. Head Starts are well known for actively engaging in communities and as originally intended, alleviating poverty.<sup>v</sup> We have successfully partnered with local LEAs to support the development of IFSPs, IEPs, preparation and transition into Kindergarten. We would like to continue these important partnerships by making the following recommendations:

- Ensure that communities without a source of preschool or Head Start programming acquire state funded Pre-K services first.
- Ensure that local school districts work with Head Start programs in their communities to ensure full enrollments in Head Start.
- Encourage local school districts to take advantage of partnerships with Head Start programs. Such partnerships can stretch state dollars in support of the Pre-K effort thus serving more children, offering family development services, critical health screening

activities and expertise in Early Childhood Education. Possibilities range from shared space to contracting state Pre-K services to Head Start programs. Currently, many excellent models of school district collaborations with Head Start programs exist in the lower 48.

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### **Statement #3**

Alaska's early learning services and activities are fragmented. Successful early learning programs are predicated on a comprehensive system that includes private and publicly funded programs. Currently in our state we offer private and non-profit infant, toddler and preschool, child care, family child care, Montessori programs, Early Head Start and Head Start programs, Home-based Parents As Teachers services, and the military child development programs. As the state continues to develop a Pre-K program, it is critically important to do so not in a vacuum, but to share resources and prevent duplication of services within the early learning community. We agree that families require a wide range of options to meet their family's needs for quality early learning opportunities. Voluntary Pre-K programming that does not consider current services will fail to meet the needs of our youngest children and their families. Determining what is best for our youngest children in our state requires the same careful consideration as other important state issues such as economic development and the education of children K-12.

### **Our Recommendations:**

Establish a public-private governance structure that creates and maintains a culturally responsive, comprehensive, and accessible statewide early childhood system that empowers families, links service providers, and engages communities on behalf of young children.

### **Economic Development:**

The importance of the role of the state's early learning community in shaping Alaska's economic future must not be underestimated. The economic impact of early education and child care, for example, is often overlooked. Yet it has been found that at least 6,500 Alaskans are employed in the early learning sector workforce. The size of this workforce is comparable to other significant industries in Alaska such as the air transportation sector and residential and nonresidential building construction.<sup>vi</sup>

Finally, experts estimate that, investment in early childhood development programs brings a real public return of 12% and a real total return, public and private, of 16%. We would be hard pressed to find any other economic development effort that has such a public return.<sup>vii</sup> The investment in Head Start has been shown to lead to increased earnings, employment, and family stability, and to decrease welfare dependency, crime, grade repetition, and special education.<sup>viii</sup>

## Conclusion

Alaska's vision for its youngest children is a work in progress. Such a vision is best developed in collaboration with other infant, toddler, preschool and child care programs and in conjunction with statewide early learning systems.

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<sup>i</sup> [www.barackobama.com/pdf/issues/PreK-12EducationFactSheet.pdf](http://www.barackobama.com/pdf/issues/PreK-12EducationFactSheet.pdf), page 3, accessed on 12/3/2008.

<sup>ii</sup> McDowell Group Report. (July 2006) *Economic Impact Report on Early Education and Child Care Services in Alaska*

<sup>iii</sup> Chailee, B. (2003). *The Young Child as Scientist A constructivist Approach To Early Childhood Science Education*. Pearson Education, Inc. p5

<sup>iv</sup> Chailee, B. (2003). *The Young Child as Scientist A constructivist Approach To Early Childhood Science Education*. Pearson Education, Inc. p10

<sup>v</sup> Heckman, J. (2006, July 17). *The Technology and neuroscience of skill formation*. Slide presentation to the Invest in Kids Working Group, Center for Economic Development, Partnership for America's Economic Success. Retrieved from [http://www.ced.org/docs/ivk/iikmeeting\\_slides200607heckman.pdf](http://www.ced.org/docs/ivk/iikmeeting_slides200607heckman.pdf); Meier, J. (2003, June 20). Interim Report. Kindergarten Readiness Study: Head Start Success. Preschool Service Department, San Bernardino County, California; Oyemade, U., V. Washington, and D. Gullo. (1989). The Relationship between Head Start Parental Involvement and the Economic and Social Self-Sufficiency of Head Start Families. *Journal of Negro Education*. 58, 1, 13.

<sup>vi</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2005, June.) Executive Summary, Head Start Impact Study First Year Findings, xv; Currie, J. and Thomas, D. (1995, June). Does Head Start Make a Difference?. *The American Economic Review*. 85, 3: 360.

<sup>vii</sup> McDowell Group Report. (July 2006) *Economic Impact Report on Early Education and Child Care Services in Alaska*

<sup>viii</sup> Barnett, W. (2002, September 13). The Battle Over Head Start: What the Research Shows. Presentation at a Science and Public Policy Briefing Sponsored by the Federation of Behavioral, Psychological, and Cognitive Sciences; Ludwig, J. and Miller, D. (2007).

Does Head Start improve children's life chances? Evidence from a regression discontinuity design. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 122 (1): 159-208.