

Alaska Early Care and Learning: Public Policy Priorities for 2013

A thriving workforce and strong economy in Alaska today and in the future depend on students graduating from high school with the academic and social skills needed for the world of work, post-secondary education or training. Because a productive pipeline isn't built starting at mile 5, it is critical to invest in Alaska's youngest children. Our children birth to five are best served by a unified, sustainable system of early care and learning, health, and family support.

A coalition of early childhood experts and leading organizations with representation from across Alaska have been working together and agree on the next steps to increase the number of healthy, happy children ready to succeed in school, and beyond. Our priorities align with recommendations made by the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council (AECCC).

Quality Early Care and Learning Action for 2013

- Invest in first steps for a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS)
- Expand professional development for early educators
- Increase investment in Head Start

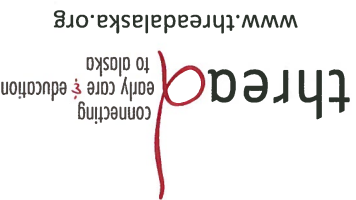
Strengthening Families Action for 2013

- Increase funding for home visiting through Parents as Teachers (PAT)
- Increase funding for Infant Learning Program to provide services to children who experience abuse and/or neglect

Community Engagement and Early Literacy Action for 2013

- Continue investment in Best Beginnings
 - ◊ Support local community efforts to improve early childhood outcomes
 - ◊ Support Imagination Library

"Early childhood education is the driver of better outcomes and returns in secondary and higher education, health and economic development."
-James Heckman, Nobel Laureate Economist, University of Chicago



Quality Early Care and Learning

A Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) in Alaska will provide a sustainable systematic approach to assess, recognize, reward and improve the level of quality in early care and learning programs. A QRIS sets standards of excellence for early care and learning programs and then provides a pathway to help programs continually improve to meet the higher standards. QRIS provide financial, training and technical assistance support for participating programs and serve as a bridge to bring together all early childhood programs under one vision of care and education. By providing public ratings of early care and education quality, more parents and families will have access to information to make better informed decisions about the types of early care and learning programs best for their children while early care and learning programs will be supported and incentivized for increased quality.

thread is Alaska's Child Care Resource and Referral Network and has the ability to expand professional development for early educators. Research shows educated teachers and caregivers are the leading indicators of quality and can make a difference in children's development and learning. Over 60% of children spend at least part of their day in non-parental care. The quality and stability of child care is therefore critical to a child's success when entering the school system. As of 2012, Alaska is ranked 28th, in the bottom half of states, for overall quality of Family Child Care Homes. Worse yet, Alaska is ranked in the bottom 10 of all states for the quality of our Child Care Centers. Contributing to this is Alaska's current professional development requirements for center directors and lead teachers that do not meet national best practice guidelines.

Early Head Start and Head Start programs in Alaska are on the front lines of helping to intervene and prepare the most at risk children and families for success in school and in life. In the 2011/2012 school year 4,194 children were served in over 100 communities in Alaska. The primary criterion for eligibility is low income - no more than ten percent of enrollees can be over established income criteria. Ten percent of slots must be reserved for children with disabilities. Between the 08/09 and 11/12 school years Early Head Start and Head Start had the following increases in number of children enrolled in these categories: Public Assistance - 355 to 807 (127% increase); Foster Children - 107 to 154 (44% increase); Homeless Children - 187 to 406 (117% increase); Children with Disabilities - 407 to 520 (28% increase).

This aligns with the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council's priorities: (1) Expand early childhood services to 5,000 new children, (2) Identify methods to increase the pay in early childhood settings, particularly for those with higher degrees and (3) Implement the QRIS (Quality Rating and Improvement System) plan.

Strengthening Families

Parents as Teachers is an internationally recognized personal visitation program for prenatal women and families with children between the ages of 0 and 5. The program is designed to respect parents as the child's first and most influential teachers, and helps build a strong foundation for the child's future success in school and life. Parents as Teachers has over 15 years of success in Alaska.

Infant Learning Programs across the state are seeing a 22% increase in referrals of infants and toddlers who have experienced abuse and neglect. Providing early intervention services to these young children is essential to changing the trajectory of their lives by protecting early brain development through evaluation, ongoing services, and developmental/parenting information.

This aligns with the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council's priorities: (1) Expand early childhood services to 5,000 new children, (5) Embed "Strengthening Families" protective factors, and (7) Ensure every child will have full access to well-child exams.

Community Engagement and Early Literacy

Best Beginnings supports diverse groups in 100 Alaska communities so that young children are prepared for success in school, and in life. Early childhood partnerships and imagination libraries receive resources - ongoing support, training, and matching funds - according to approved plans. Seven early childhood partnerships across Alaska are coming up with innovative ways to collaborate, use resources more effectively, and help families prepare their children for kindergarten. More than 19,975 children 0-5 in 100 Alaska communities receive a free book in the mail every month through Imagination Library. Evaluation results are positive: children are read to more, have more books at home, and are more enthusiastic about reading - increasing the likelihood of their becoming good readers and graduating from high school.

This aligns with the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council's priorities: (1) Expand early childhood services to 5,000 new children, and (6) Support and promote a local partnerships grant process to invest in early childhood and family support.