

ALASKA EARLY CHILDHOOD COORDINATING **COUNCIL**

STATEWIDE STRATEGIC REPORT

November 2012

AECCC Statewide Strategic Report

Executive Summary

The quality of life for Alaska's young children impacts the health, economic, and social outcomes for all citizens of our state. Investments in quality early childhood programs have demonstrated a positive rate of return by increasing school success and graduation rates, workforce productivity, and responsible citizenship, while decreasing the later need for special education, incarceration, and dependency on social institutions.

As part of the Head Start Reauthorization Act of 2007, states were required to establish State Advisory Councils on Early Childhood Education and Care, which have also come to be known as Early Childhood Advisory Councils. The Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council (AECCC) promotes positive development, improved health and mental health outcomes and school readiness for Alaska's children prenatal through 8 by creating a culturally responsive, comprehensive and accessible service delivery system that links service providers, empowers families, and engages communities. Under a Memorandum of Agreement signed by all the Council members, the AECCC facilitates the integration and alignment of services, planning efforts, resources, policy development, and funding as well as strengthens connections between health, mental health, education and family support systems and public and private partners.

A significant task of the AECCC during its first year of operation has been the development of a strategic report for the Governor. The report outlines eight recommendations in the following areas:

- increasing the overall participation of children in early childhood programs for those seeking access;
- supporting planning and coordination of local, regional and state partnerships;
- improving professional development for early childhood professionals;
- improving State early learning standards;
- establishing a unified data collection and monitoring system; and
- facilitating the integration and alignment of services, planning efforts, resources, policy development and funding.

In order to increase the overall participation of children in early childhood programs for those seeking access, the Council's first recommendation is *to expand early childhood services to 5000 new children and families through in home and out of home services*. Support for this priority allows more parents and families to have choices regarding the types of programs and supports in which they and their young children engage. More community entities will coordinate services in family and child centered approaches that provide children with an individualized and intentional set of interactions that change over time based on the needs and decisions of that family. Finally, more families will be strong advocates for their children, ready to engage in a partnership with their child's school, and more children will be ready for success in that school setting.

The Council's second recommendation is to *identify methods to increase the pay in early childhood settings, particularly for those with higher degrees*. The AECCC believes when links are developed between professional development and staff compensation, early childhood workers would be encouraged to remain in the workforce and advance up the career ladder, providing consistent and stable services for young children.

In order to establish a unified data collection, monitoring and reporting system and improve the state's early learning standards, the Council's third recommendation is to *implement a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)*. When this recommendation is supported, there will be a sustainable system to recognize, reward and improve the quality of early care and education programs. A QRIS will provide a reliable method for parents and the public to evaluate early care and education programs, ensuring children have access to programs that offer strong foundations for learning and life-long positive outcomes. Ultimately, 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.

In order to improve the state's early learning standards, the Council's fourth recommendation is to *increase awareness of the Alaska Early Learning Guidelines (ELGs) by coordinating efforts (public and private) to include the "universal" early care and learning workforce (parents; extended family, community)*. In supporting this recommendation Alaska gains the connective outreach that builds a standards-based support system for parents, families, programs, and communities working with young children and supports alignment of educational services through grade 12.

The Council's fifth recommendation is to *embed "Strengthening Families" protective factors through systems across the board to include grant proposals, policies, materials development, and long-term funding efforts*. This recommendation will support families in their roles as primary caregivers through programs that are responsive to emerging family and community issues and models for the principles of family support. Families will have access to a user-friendly, culturally competent, integrated service delivery system. A clearinghouse will serve as a repository of information regarding best practices in family services; support interdisciplinary training; provide technical assistance; and distribute information to programs, stakeholders and policy makers.

In order to further assist early childhood efforts within local communities, the Council's sixth recommendation is to *support and promote a local partnerships grant process to invest in early childhood and family support*. The Council believes that communities will have a better chance at truly meeting the needs of young children and families, and the network of partnerships will be able to grow, when this recommendation is supported. This will move Alaska toward a culturally responsive, comprehensive, and accessible service delivery system for young children that links service providers, empowers families, and engages communities.

The Council's final two recommendations concern the health and safety of Alaska's youngest citizens. Recommendation seven is to *seek to ensure every child will have full access to well-child exams that follow the Alaska Periodicity Schedule*, and recommendation eight is to *seek to ensure every child and their family has full access to age appropriate services that promote physical, emotional,*

and behavioral health and safety. Physical and mental health are key components in cognitive development and learning. Supporting these recommendations will promote positive development, improved health and school readiness outcomes for young children.

In conclusion, research across a broad spectrum of disciplines indicates that providing resources for young children and their families increases their potential for social and economic success. Early childhood education improves outcomes across multiple dimensions: education, crime, child welfare, and health care. Investments in Alaska's youngest citizens and their families will have far-reaching implications in regard to Alaska's future development as a state.