

Testimony before the Child and Families Subcommittee of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee

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Good morning Senator Mikulski, Senator Burr and Members of the Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to testify regarding “Examining Quality and Safety in Child Care: Giving Working Families Security, Confidence and Peace of Mind.” I have been engaged in early childhood development and education throughout my career, and specifically involved in administering the Child Care and Development Block Grant at the state, federal and local program delivery levels. From the late 1980’s through 1998 I was the state child care administrator in Texas, and then spent approximately 2 and one half years leading the Child Care Bureau (now Office of Child Care) within ACF. Currently I am the President and CEO of a large non-profit in Denver, Clayton Early Learning, operating one of the Educare Schools. We also provide teacher preparation programs, curriculum design, and program evaluations. For a good part of my career I have worked on policies and administrative procedures related to maximizing the public investments our country makes in young children and their families through child care assistance, Head Start, and state and local prekindergarten programs. This experience includes working directly with state and federal legislative bodies on bill language, drafting of state and federal program rules and regulations, and program implementation at the local level. This background gives me a deep knowledge of both the day to day workings of the child care subsidies available to low income parents through the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), as well as an appreciation of the opportunities and challenges faced by state and local administrators and the families that access the program.

The CCDBG is an essential thread in the overall fabric of early childhood education and developmental supports, along with Early Head Start and Head Start, state and local prekindergarten programs, and programs for children with identified special education needs. While it was authorized as a separate program in legislation, has a separate appropriation, and its own set of regulations, at the local program level it is often the “glue” that holds multiple funding streams together. For example, it can be used to extend the day and year for children enrolled in part day, part year Head Start and prekindergarten programs. However, unlike these other programs a child’s eligibility for CCDBG funding is tied to the parent’s engagement in work or training.

As our country has grappled with a growing understanding of the importance of the earliest years in a child’s development, the significance of early education to later academic achievement, and attempts to help low income families achieve economic self-sufficiency, we have inadvertently created a jigsaw puzzle of programs and services, often with ill-fitting pieces. We talk about providing supports to children with “high needs”, yet the needs of an individual child are often defined differently depending on the program or funding stream in which the child is enrolled. For example, a child from a low income family is defined as needing comprehensive early education, family support and health/mental health services if he is enrolled in Head Start. The very same child is defined as only needing early education if

enrolled in prekindergarten. And again, the very same child is defined as primarily needing safe child care during the hours his parent(s) is (are) working if he is enrolled in a CCDBG child care subsidy. Which of these programs the child is actually enrolled in is often the luck of the draw, and is highly dependent upon the funding source available at the time the low income parent seeks a program, the parent's knowledge of the programs available in the community, the parent's work schedule, and the age of the child. As Louise Stoney and Anne Mitchell put it so well in their recent white paper entitled *Toward Better Policy for Early Care and Education in the United States*, "The US can no longer afford the inefficiency of making policy by funding stream."

This inefficiency is illustrated by a family, father David and sons Jeremy and Frank, currently enrolled in Clayton Educare. David has sole custody of his two young boys and was employed when they were first enrolled in our full day, full year Early Head Start and Head Start program. Access to the full day, full year option requires that the parent qualify for both Head Start and the child care subsidy program, as the Head Start per child funding only covers part day, part year. When first enrolled, as a toddler and young preschooler, the boys were very shy, did not speak much at all, and seldom engaged in play with the other children. After the first year, both boys were making great progress as noted by their teachers both anecdotally and through various norm referenced assessments. However, David then lost his job. He was given a period of job search by his child care assistance caseworker and found temporary work, but that soon also dried up. As he reached the end of his allowable weeks of job search for the child care subsidy, he faced losing the full day full year services for his boys. By stretching resources, our program was able to cover the funding gap for a few months over the summer so that Jeremy could continue in the program until transitioning to kindergarten this fall. The younger child, however, is now enrolled in just part day, part year for his final year prior to entering kindergarten next fall. In addition to a shorter day, this also means he is placed in a different classroom with new teachers and new peers. We are concerned that he may very well lose ground in this arrangement as the program "dosage" is simply not deep enough for our most at risk children, and the all-important continuity of care has been lost. We frankly also question the wisdom of now risking the public investment already made in this child by not allowing continued child care funding to support bringing him across the finish line. In addition, David is now limited to just three hours per day to continue his job search (while Frank is in the part day Head Start program).

Unfortunately, this story is not unique. Providers of early childhood care and education that accept child care subsidies face a constant threat of losing funding, and children. The original focus of the program on supporting parents as they become engaged in work is critical to family self-sufficiency. However, with historically limited funding in the program, increasing demand for the service and increased wait lists in many states, well-intentioned implementation policies have too often become the enemy of the good. In an effort to stretch the limited funding to serve as many as possible, we have caused families and children to cycle on and off the program in relatively short bursts that neither support children's development and school readiness, nor their parents' long-term attachment to the workforce. The situation has only been exacerbated by the nature of program reports required of state administrators. When the primary marker of success is the number served, a "slot" occupied in one year by two to three children is cause for celebration. How different would our policies and therefore our celebrations be if

instead we were asked to report on the number served in programs with proven track records of preparing children for success in school, and on the number of parents that remained employed while their children were enrolled?

In recognition of the critical need to address the quality of settings in which children receive child care services, the CCDBG, as you are aware, offers small amounts of funding in the form of set asides for a variety of initiatives including teacher professional development, licensing and monitoring, classroom and playground enhancements, resource and referral for parents and providers, quality rating and improvement systems, and initiatives specifically addressing care for infants and toddlers. However, to date we have not held ourselves accountable on a large scale for whether the funded initiatives have actually made a difference in either measurable quality of settings, or child and family outcomes. I frankly believe that we have been fearful of the repercussions if our efforts were found to be inadequate. And they may well be inadequate, not for lack of trying, but for lack of both sufficient funding and comprehensive approaches aimed at true systems level change.

I am heartened by the recent revisions to the state plan preprint for the CCDBG as I believe they clearly signal a new era is upon us. The changes offer greater guidance to states on ways the funds can and perhaps should be used to create a stronger foundation for more child and family outcome focused administration of the program. I am also very excited about the opportunity for states to compete for the Early Learning Challenge Fund grants. While to some extent it seems that we are all trying to front load everything we've been dreaming of into this one grant, I do believe the very process of applying is extremely valuable to states, even though only a limited number will receive funding. The guidelines for the grant application are causing strong examination of where states are, and again signal a new era of accountability for systems change that will help ensure more high need children are in higher quality settings based on evidence of what can really make a difference.

It is also exciting to witness additional efforts on the part of the federal government to address long standing issues regarding the often fragmented approaches to school readiness and program monitoring across multiple funding streams and programs. Colorado is participating in this effort as one of the school readiness learning lab states. As a provider of a program of exceptional quality and proven child outcomes, I welcome the exploration of potential joint monitoring among funding stream administrators and a deep look at how school readiness is supported by multiple programs. At Clayton Educare, while we use multiple funding streams, the program functions as one. A visitor cannot tell which funding stream is funding which child, which part of the day, which teacher, or which set of classroom materials. We have vast amounts of paperwork that lay all that out, but it is invisible to the children, the families and our visitors. A reduction in that paperwork, greater alignment among program regulations and policies, and a clear focus on child outcomes among funding streams, would go a long way toward making our dreams of all children entering school ready for success a reality.

With the new state plan, the Early Learning Challenge Fund guidance, and the school readiness and monitoring learning labs as backdrop, I bring recommendations on ways the CCDBG can become a

vehicle for improved quality in all child care settings and can further ensure continuity of care in evidence-based programs for our highest need children.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Formalize in statute the program guidance in place since 1999 addressing alignment of eligibility periods with Head Start or state or local funded prekindergarten for children enrolled in both CCDBG and one or both of the other programs.
2. Require states to establish eligibility redetermination policies that support continuity of care for all children for a period of at least 12 months, including limited or no reporting of changes in family income or work arrangements of the parents during the authorized period (as is already the case with Head Start and most prekindergarten programs that are means tested).
3. Encourage all states to build or continue to strengthen an existing tiered quality rating and improvement system such that all early childhood settings (child care, Head Start, preschool) are included and incentivized to reach the higher levels of quality.
4. Establish financial rewards for states that make steady progress in providing access to higher rated programs (as measured by QRIS) for higher needs children.
5. In support of #4, allow states greater flexibility in using contracts for CCDBG slots with high quality providers (as measured by QRIS) by removing the requirement that each parent must be offered a voucher in lieu of a contracted slot.
6. Require states to recognize the actual costs of higher quality when establishing reimbursement rate structures for CCDBG slots.
7. Require that if states choose to use CCDBG funding for licensing and monitoring, the work performed with the funds is related directly to higher quality standards as measured by QRIS.
8. Revise state reporting requirements so that we begin to measure what really matters, including the number of CCDBG funded children enrolled in higher quality settings, the number of parents that remain employed, progress among providers in achieving the higher ratings within a state's QRIS, the alignment of standards within a state across all early childhood settings, and the progress of teachers in achieving higher levels of professional preparation.

Thank you again for this opportunity to express my thoughts about how we can move forward as a nation in addressing outcomes for our highest need children. The CCDBG is an essential component in our forward movement, and I look forward to changes that will support greater alignment of this program with others within the fabric of early childhood care and education.