

**Testimony of Charlotte M. Brantley
President and CEO
Clayton Early Learning, Denver CO**

Before the

Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee Hearing:

Supporting Children and Families through Investments in High-Quality Early Education

Thursday, February 6, 2014

Good morning, Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Alexander and members of the Committee. My name is Charlotte Brantley; I am the President and CEO of Clayton Early Learning in Denver, Colorado. Thank you for the opportunity to share some exciting early learning developments in Colorado and shed some light on how these align with and support my organization's mission to ensure all Colorado children have access to a high quality early education.

Clayton Early Learning is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization with more than a century of history providing vulnerable children with a good start toward success. Though we first opened our doors in 1911 as an orphanage and school for boys, our focus in today's world is on offering the highest quality early childhood education experiences and facilitating other providers to do the same. We currently provide exemplary early care and education services directly to more than 600 primarily low income children prenatally to age 5. While we offer several different program options designed to give parents choices, all are research-based, family-centered, comprehensive, and results-driven.

We also work with many public and private partners including public schools, state agencies, higher education, health and mental health, and private funders to improve early learning systems throughout Colorado. Our statewide coaching and training services reach more than 2500 early education teachers and leaders every year, impacting the quality of services for thousands of additional children. We have been an Early Head Start grantee since the late 1980's, began offering Head Start in the mid

1990's and joined the nationwide Educare Learning Network in 2006. In 2010, we were named one of 10 national Centers of Excellence in Early Childhood by the US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Head Start. I personally have been in the business of early childhood for more than 30 years, serving in academia, state and federal program and policy administration, children's educational media, and local program operations.

An ever expanding body of research indicates that young children from disadvantaged homes start kindergarten lagging behind their more advantaged peers. We know this gap grows, continues into high school, and negatively impacts adulthood. It is linked to illiteracy, teen pregnancy, juvenile justice issues, high dropout rates, and unemployment.

Our ultimate goal at Clayton Early Learning is to reverse this discouraging trend. Child progress evaluations within our own programs make clear that learning gaps in the area of language development begin in infancy. If not addressed, this lag in early language development will later manifest itself as a lag in overall academic achievement. It is much more efficient to close these gaps very early, or prevent them from opening at all. Children and families, particularly those with multiple risk factors, need the support of a coordinated system of early learning, parent engagement, social/emotional development, and health and nutrition to be "school ready" when it comes time to enter kindergarten. Component parts of such a system include:

- Professional development opportunities, matched with adequate wages, to build and retain high performing staff;
- Clear articulation of early learning standards and program guidelines, across funding streams and program approaches;
- Support for parents in helping their children acquire language, literacy skills, and problem-solving skills;
- Empowering parents to form networks and to reach their own aspirational goals;
- Supports for young children's progress toward healthy social/emotional development and self-regulation skills, including access to mental health services for both children and the adults in their lives; and
- Physical health and nutrition supports.

Creating and maintaining such a coordinated system is made possible by expanded opportunities to leverage federal-state and public-private investments to support linkage of services and programs across the critical prenatal to age five period of children's rapid growth and development. We applaud related efforts such as the introduction of the Strong Start for America's Children Act and the recent appropriation of \$500 million to create Early Head Start and Child care partnerships.

Colorado is moving forward with an enhanced focus on improving and expanding access to early learning experiences for all our children. We recognize that we must do more to reach communities throughout our state. Our geographic and economic diversity (urban, rural, frontier) at times poses significant challenges in terms of service delivery. In addition, while many urban areas in Colorado have seen their child population grow, most rural communities across the state have experienced declines in child population, increasing the challenge of creating cost effective ways to provide the same level of early learning services.

In 2011, children were the age group most likely to be living in poverty in Colorado. Unfortunately, children under the age of 6 – whose brains are at the most critical developmental stages – are more likely to live in poverty than older children. In 2011, 21% of all Colorado children under 6 lived in poverty and more disturbing, since 2000 the number of young children living in poverty has increased by 136%. As you know, poverty is closely associated with challenges such as unstable housing, a lack of nutritious foods, and physical and mental health issues that can impact a child's ability to learn.¹ Furthermore, children affected by several adverse circumstances – three or more risk factors- are the most likely to experience school failure and other negative outcomes. An estimated 15% of children under the age of 6 experience multiple risk factors in CO (2011).²

State and local efforts are underway on several fronts to ensure we reach greater numbers of our children with high quality early learning

¹ KidsCount. Colorado Children's Campaign. Page 17, 57

² NCCP "Investing in Young Children" page 3

experiences. Colorado's state-funded preschool program or CPP provides preschool for approximately 20,000 children each school year.³ The program serves mostly 3 and 4 year-olds that exhibit risk factors such as eligibility for free and reduced lunch, homelessness, drug abuse in the family, etc. Currently 171 out of 179 school districts participate plus the Charter School Institute. In many districts, local funds are added to what is available from the state to expand the number of children provided with a quality early education.

CPP leverages a mixed delivery model that encourages local school districts to partner with Head Start and community-based early childhood programs. Statewide, about 9% of the enrolled children are receiving CPP services embedded in a Head Start program, about 23% are served in a community-based partner site, while 68% are served within public school sites operated directly by the school district. Clayton Early Learning is fortunate to have a very strong and long-standing partnership with Denver Public Schools (DPS). Currently, we have just over 250 half day preschool slots, funded with state and local district preschool funds, under contract with DPS.

Effective collaborations, such as those with school districts, create the systems to support children's success. We know first-hand that early childhood education at the community level through programs such as CPP strengthen the public-private partnerships between school districts, community-based programs, and Head Start programs. We fully support continued encouragement of such partnerships to leverage all of the early care and education resources in local communities to create high quality choices for parents to help their children succeed.

In Colorado we see that a quality preschool experience can have lasting effects on into a child's k-12 academic career. For example, when compared to a matched cohort of students, children that participated in CPP continue to outperform their non-participant at risk peers on state achievement measures, even into middle school. We are continuing to track CPP participants through high school. At Clayton Early Learning, we

³ CPP 2013 Legislative Report

are also tracking our children's performance as they enter the k-12 system through our partnership with Denver Public Schools.

Last year, the Colorado State Legislature approved an additional 3,200 CPP slots (\$10M investment) through Colorado's annual school finance act. Despite these investments, however, we know we reach just 14% of eligible children in our state and have a long way to go. In addition, Colorado currently funds only half-day kindergarten and relies on individual parents or the taxpayers in each school district to cover the remaining cost of full-day kindergarten.

While we hope to see increased investments in our state's preschool program, CPP is just one funding source that contributes to our early learning landscape. Nurse Home Visiting Programs, Food Assistance, Child Care Assistance, Early Head Start and Head Start – all contribute to creating a more efficient and effective system to promote better child outcomes. In addition, several school districts and local city and county governments have significantly increased public funding available to support early childhood programs. For example, the sales tax funded Denver Preschool Program recently enrolled the 25,000th child since the program's inception in 2006/2007. Summit County voters recently approved a ballot measure to extend a property tax levy supporting early childhood care and learning programs. Voters in Denver overwhelmingly approved an increase in local public school taxes in November 2012 that included significant expansion of preschool for four year olds. At Clayton Early Learning we help our families access all funding streams for which they are eligible, and work to create a seamless integration within our program options.

Colorado is fortunate to receive a Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant of \$30 million and a supplemental grant of \$15 million over four years. This grant opportunity is setting in motion a number of initiatives to maximize a broader, coordinated set of state and local early childhood efforts supported by foundations, private companies, and the state. Increasing kindergarten readiness is one of Colorado's top priorities, as we know it is a major milestone in a child's path to success. To accomplish this

goal, Colorado's most at-risk children must have access to the kinds of high quality early learning programs that will give them a great start. Major actions covered by the grant work plan include:

- Efficient and effective grant management and coordination, supported by the newly-established Office of Early Childhood within the Colorado Department of Human Services
 - Communication to families, especially those with high needs, on all aspects of quality including the Early Learning and Development Guidelines, Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (TQRIS), and statewide online resources to increase ease of access to high quality programs
 - Supports to local early childhood councils to provide flexible, responsive support of grant activities at the local level
 - Grant evaluation per federal specifications
- Tracking Implementation of High-Quality, Accountable Programs
 - Statewide implementation of the new TQRIS tied to child care licensing
 - Training and communication to programs and providers on the new TQRIS
 - Supports to increase quality, including local supports for shared services, especially for high need programs
 - Early Childhood Data System (ECDS) development including access and reporting for families, providers, and administrators
- Promoting Early Learning and Development Outcomes for Children
 - Development and dissemination of user-appropriate tools for programs, providers, and families
 - Incorporation of Early Learning and Development Guidelines (ELDG) into the TQRIS, training and professional development, assessment training, and c communications to communities and families
- Ensuring a Great Early Childhood Education Workforce
 - Unification of the state workforce competency system

- Alignment of teacher preparation programs (2-year and 4-year) around workforce competencies and promote articulation of coursework across all institutions
- Incorporation of competencies into statewide professional development opportunities
- Development of measurements for competencies in order to give credit for prior learning
- Provision of incentives and supports to advance through the ladder of competencies, especially for high need providers
- Full deployment of a statewide Learning Management System (incorporating a workforce registry) to advance professional development opportunities to the early childhood education workforce.
- Measuring Outcomes and Progress
 - Tiered expansion of the Results Matter program to track outcomes for more Children with high needs from birth through 5 years of age.
 - Implementation of a kindergarten entry assessment for all children in all school districts statewide

Throughout the work plan are two emphases: 1) the development of data systems and increased data sharing across programs and departments for continuous quality improvement, and 2) an increased emphasis on educating and empowering families so they can best support the optimal development of their children and become effective advocates when needed. Starting with the new Office of Early Childhood, through smarter management of grant activities and a new emphasis on empowering and educating families, these efforts will constitute a comprehensive evolution in the state's push for quality early learning programs. Together, these accomplishments will enable Colorado to achieve significant increases in overall kindergarten readiness as well as major decreases in the gap in readiness between children with high needs and their peers.

In 2013 our Governor appointed Early Childhood Leadership Commission was reauthorized by the state legislature. This body of 20 individuals represents business, state agencies, parents, early childhood program

providers, Head Start and private foundation leaders. A key component of its charter is to advise the Office of Early Childhood and other relevant state offices on implementation of all aspects of the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant work plan.

Colorado established a system of local early childhood councils many years ago, and expanded their numbers in recent years to create statewide coverage. These local councils are charged with identifying the best ways to facilitate local coordination among programs and services serving children and their families. In addition, they are often the conduit for moving funding and other supports targeted to improving quality down to the local grass roots level. In many cases they have also successfully increased local investments in early childhood programming.

Establishing and maintaining this state and local leadership infrastructure is critical to ensuring we are leveraging our public investments to their utmost potential, better able to monitor child outcomes, and continuously improve the vital supports that serve our youngest and most vulnerable learners.

Clayton Early Learning leadership staff serve as members of the Governor appointed State Commission and the local Denver Council. We strongly believe it is our obligation to take part in the early childhood quality and access improvement work at all levels and to share what we learn through our own demonstration programs.

In conclusion, I would like to encourage you to continue thinking about how we as a nation want to invest in our future. The work I get to do every day sends me home feeling very good, and not just because little children are so satisfying to be around. At Clayton Early Learning, we believe that all children are born with unlimited potential, and that all parents want the best for their children. As I was beginning a tour of our Educare School one day for a research physician in Colorado who is also a Head Start graduate, I mentioned that the children we serve are often destined to never finish high school unless we do something, now. He looked across the group of preschool children before us on the playground and replied, "Yes, and you never know which one will cure cancer, given the opportunity." This is

about giving all our children the opportunity to enjoy life every day while a young child, see themselves as a successful learner, and to become a contributor to the greater good as they grow up. We know this will take concerted effort on the part of practitioners, policy makers, funders, families, and the public at large, and at Clayton we are confident that as a nation, we can do it.

I thank you for your efforts, and those being made by the states you represent.