



CITY OF PROVIDENCE

Angel Taveras, Mayor

April 10, 2014

Hon. Tom Harkin, Chairman
Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions
428 Dirksen Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Strong Start for America's Children Act

Dear Chairman Harkin and Honorable Members of the Committee:

My name is Angel Taveras and I have the honor of serving as the 37th Mayor of the City of Providence, Rhode Island. It is my distinct pleasure to join you today and provide testimony in support of the Strong Start for America's Children Act.

Let me begin by sharing with you a small piece of my personal story: I am a proud Head Start graduate. I grew up on the South Side of Providence, in publicly subsidized housing, where I was raised by a hardworking single mother who worked second shift in Rhode Island factories to support my sister, my brother and me.

I graduated from the Providence Public School system. I often credit my third grade teacher Mrs. Donaldson for encouraging me to pursue my passion of becoming an attorney despite having few role models in my life to emulate. Thanks to her and the countless other educators who supported me along the way, I attended Harvard University, the Georgetown University Law Center and in 2011 was inaugurated as the first Latino Mayor of the City of Providence.

I can say with confidence that the success I have enjoyed as an adult would not have been possible without the tremendous amount of support I received as a young person. That's why I am so glad to support the legislation that is before your Committee today.

The Strong Start for America's Children Act would launch a 10-year federal and state partnership designed to expand and improve early learning opportunities for America's youngest learners. Specifically, this legislation would create America's first federal funding formula for high-quality, full-day pre-kindergarten for four-year old children for families earning up to 200% of the federal poverty level. And importantly, this legislation does not sacrifice quality in the name of expanding access: participating states must ensure that educators are highly qualified, that student-teacher ratios are low and that instruction is grounded in evidence and developmentally appropriate practices.

OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

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Early childhood education is critically important for the development of our young people and the communities in which they live. Studies have demonstrated that participation in pre-kindergarten programs help young people develop important cognitive, behavioral and problem-solving skills. Pre kindergarten graduates are more likely to attend college, maintain a full-time job, and have health insurance.¹ According to the Economic Policy Institute, lifetime economic benefits realize a return-on-investment of as much as \$11 for each dollar invested.² It is no surprise, therefore, that 89% of Americans surveyed say it is important to make early education and child care more affordable for working families.³

Rhode Island launched its first state-sponsored pre-kindergarten program in 2009. By most accounts, the program has been a tremendous success: according to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), Rhode Island's state pre-kindergarten meets all 10 benchmarks for quality standards.⁴ And yet unfortunately, our program is severely limited in scope: only one per cent of Rhode Island's four year olds are enrolled in our state-financed preschool program, compared to highs of 74% in Oklahoma⁵ and 65% in Vermont⁶, and a national average of approximately 28% of four year olds enrolled in state-financed pre-kindergarten programs.⁷ In fact, Rhode Island has the lowest percentage of four-year-old children enrolled in state pre-kindergarten of any state in the nation with a state sponsored program.⁸ Compounding this problem, approximately 30% of our young people also lack access to full-day kindergarten programs.

As Mayor, I have made early childhood learning a top priority for my administration. Our campaign to ensure that every child is reading on grade level by the end of third grade won Providence a designation by the National Civic League's as an All America City for Grade Level Reading in 2012. Providence was recently named one of the 100 Best Communities for Young People by America's Promise Alliance. And in 2013, I was proud when the City of Providence was named the Grand Prize winner in the Bloomberg Philanthropies' Mayors Challenge.

Our winning initiative, "Providence Talks," seeks to address research that shows that children growing up in low-income households hear up to thirty-million fewer words than their middle- and high-income peers by their fourth birthday. Here in Providence, we know that approximately two-thirds of our kindergarten registrants arrive behind on national literacy benchmarks on the very first day of school. Thanks to a \$5 million investment from Bloomberg Philanthropies, Providence is empowering parents and caretakers with the tools and resources necessary to understand and strengthen their household auditory environments.

¹ "High-quality preschool program produces long-term economic payoff," National Institutes of Health, 2/4/2011

² "Enriching Children, Enriching the Nation: Rhode Island Summary," Lynch, Economic Policy Institute, 7/9/2007

² "Enriching Children, Enriching the Nation: Rhode Island Summary," Lynch, Economic Policy Institute, 7/9/2007

³ "Early Childhood Education is a Top Priority for Voters, Second Only to Increasing Jobs and Economic Growth," First Five Years Fund, 7/2013

⁴ "The State of Preschool, 2012," Rhode Island, National Institute for Early Education Research

⁵ "The State of Preschool, 2012," Oklahoma, National Institute for Early Education Research

⁶ "The State of Preschool, 2012," Vermont, National Institute for Early Education Research

⁷ "The State of Preschool, 2012," United States, National Institute for Early Education Research

⁸ "The State of Preschool, 2011," National Institute for Early Education Research. Based on 2010-2011 enrollment data.

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The work we are doing at the local level is important, but we need leadership at the highest levels to ensure that all of Rhode Island's young people have the opportunities they need to succeed. That is why, as a candidate for Governor, I have laid out a plan to achieve universal pre-kindergarten for all of Rhode Island's children. I know that the sad and simple truth is that if we choose *not* to make investments in the critical years of early development, we will pay for them down the line in the forms of remedial instruction, reduced economic productivity and criminal justice costs.

America's young people cannot wait for future leaders to take action: they demand that we take action now to ensure that they have access to the same life-changing opportunities that so many of us enjoyed as young people. On behalf of young people in the City of Providence and in the State of Rhode Island, I strongly encourage your Committee's full support for the Strong Start for America's Children Act.

Thank you for the opportunity to address your Committee, and I welcome questions from Committee members.