

Early Education and Care: What is the Federal Government's Role?

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Testimony

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for this opportunity to bring you up to date on the Department of Education's efforts to improve the quality of early childhood education. From the very beginning of his Administration, President Bush—with help from First Lady Laura Bush—emphasized the importance of education during a child's earliest years, based on their understanding of new scientific research on brain development and early cognition that suggested a new paradigm, one focused on prevention of learning difficulties rather than remediation. Since then, we have worked hard to incorporate that paradigm into each of the early childhood education programs we administer at the Department of Education.

More recently, Secretary Spellings has stepped up interagency collaboration with Secretary Leavitt of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Importantly, this collaboration will include the insight and leadership of Dr. Reid Lyon, one of the Nation's foremost experts on early childhood development and education. As most of you know, while at the National Institutes of Health, Dr. Lyon played a key role in developing Early Reading First and Reading First, which I believe are the first Federal education programs to mandate the use of scientifically based research in reading instruction for low-income children, both in preschool and in the early elementary grades.

Five years ago, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) completed a report on early education and care that highlighted the large number—69 in all—of Federal programs that provided or supported education and care for children under age 5. Because of the sheer number of these programs, as well as the fact that they were administered by no fewer than 9 separate agencies or departments, the GAO quite reasonably suggested that the Federal Government might not be supporting early childhood education and care in the most efficient and effective way possible. The GAO also suggested that performance and evaluation data then being collected under the Government Performance and Results Act should be used to guide policymakers in making the reforms needed to improve the delivery of effective early childhood education.

I believe we have made much progress since the publication of that GAO report, both at the Department of Education (ED) and in concert with our fellow agencies. Particularly with regard to our own programs, we have worked hard to measure program effectiveness, streamline and consolidate programs, require the use of scientifically based research to deliver effective services, and coordinate separate programs serving the same

populations.

## WHITE HOUSE SUMMIT

In July of 2001, First Lady Laura Bush hosted a White House Summit on Early Childhood Cognitive Development as part of her Ready to Read, Ready to Learn initiative. This initiative had two broad goals: to ensure that all young children are ready to read and learn when they enter kindergarten, and to ensure that every classroom has a well-trained teacher, particularly in high-poverty areas.

The Summit aimed at supporting these goals by publicizing the findings of scientific research into early cognitive development and encouraging parents, early childhood educators, and other caregivers to use research-based activities to help develop the early language and pre-reading skills of young children. This reflected the Administration's belief that education was not a strong enough component of most early childhood programs: that there was little connection between preschool activities and what children are required to do once they enter school; that few early childhood programs were evaluated on the basis of how well they prepared children to succeed in school; and that parents, early childhood teachers, and other caregivers had little valid information on how to prepare children for success in school.

## GOOD START, GROW SMART

To help address these problems, in early 2002 President Bush launched his Good Start, Grow Smart initiative, which aims to strengthen the academic focus of Head Start programs, encourage States to develop quality criteria for early childhood programs that are aligned with their K-12 academic standards, and expand research into effective pre-reading and language curricula and teaching strategies in order to provide better information to parents, teachers, and caregivers.

A key achievement of Good Start, Grow Smart was the creation of an Interagency Workgroup that includes offices involved in early childhood education and care from both ED and HHS. ED participants include my own office, which administers the Early Reading First, Title I, Even Start, and the Early Childhood Educator Professional Development programs; the Office of Special Education Programs, which administers the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Preschool Grants and Grants for Infants, Toddlers, and Families programs; and the Institute for Education Sciences, which carries out research on early childhood education. The Workgroup meets monthly to coordinate Federal efforts to support the implementation of Good Start, Grow Smart in States and local communities.

As part of Good Start, Grow Smart, ED developed and published a guide for caregivers in early 2002 called Teaching Our Youngest. We also collaborated with HHS in hosting regional Early Childhood Educator Academies that were designed to assist States in developing voluntary high-quality early learning guidelines. Nearly all States have now drafted these guidelines. Last fall, the Interagency Workgroup sponsored the 2nd State

Early Learning Guidelines Roundtable, where 10 of the most progressive States shared their experiences implementing early learning guidelines and collaborating across child care, Head Start, Pre-K, and other early childhood education partners.

Under the research component of Good Start, Grow Smart, ED's Institute for Education Sciences is investing significant resources in scientific research on early childhood education, including a systematic evaluation of preschool curricula based on randomized trials and an Early Childhood Longitudinal Study is tracking the experiences of children from birth through 5th grade. IES's National Center for Education Evaluation also is conducting large-scale randomized trials to develop and evaluate the effectiveness of reading instruction.

Good Start, Grow Smart also launched an interagency early childhood research initiative, known as the Interagency School Readiness Consortium, which includes ED and HHS and is led by the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development. This initiative is investing \$39.5 million in research on the effectiveness of early childhood curricula, programs, and interventions in promoting the range of cognitive, social, and behavioral skills necessary for a child's successful entry into school. In 2003, the Consortium made five-year grants to 8 institutions across the country to identify the types of early childhood programs and interventions that are most effective—when implemented in public settings, including State pre-kindergarten, Head Start, child care, and blended programs—in supporting early learning and school readiness, with an emphasis on literacy and social competence outcomes.

#### ED PROGRAMS: EMPHASIS ON EFFECTIVENESS AND CONSOLIDATION

Within the Department of Education, we have subjected all of our programs to close scrutiny for evidence of effectiveness and duplication, and our early childhood programs are no exception. We also have sought to employ the findings of scientific research in improving the effectiveness of our programs, particularly in the areas of cognitive and language development and early reading instruction, key priorities for effective early childhood education.

The GAO report that I mentioned earlier found that the Department administered 34 programs providing or supporting early childhood education and care. GAO distinguished between programs for which those activities are merely allowable and those for which they are a basic program purpose, and I believe this distinction is an important one. In the interest of expanding flexibility for States and communities, Congress has increased the range of allowable activities for many programs in recent years, especially for our large State formula grant programs. This new flexibility makes a lot of sense, both educationally and administratively, and I believe it is somewhat misleading to count such expanded authorities as though they were discrete programs. To cite just one example, prekindergarten programs are one of no fewer than 35 authorized activities under State Grants for Innovative Programs, a program specifically designed by Congress to provide maximum flexibility for States and school districts. To call such a program an early childhood program implies a level of duplication and overlap that does not really exist.

But as I said, we do take seriously the goal of streamlining and consolidating our programs wherever possible, and if the GAO were to update its list of ED early childhood programs today, it would number 26 and not 34, after the consolidation or elimination of 8 programs on the earlier list. And our 2006 budget request would eliminate an additional 7 programs on GAO's April 2000 list.

One key program that has been targeted for elimination is Even Start, a popular family literacy program with laudable goals, but one that national evaluations repeatedly have found to be ineffective. The key finding is a simple one: the literacy gains of children and adults participating in Even Start were no greater than those of non-participants. We think it makes more sense to direct our energy and resources to more promising approaches.

#### KEY ED EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

The Department's Reading First initiative provides the best evidence of the President's determination to inject rigor into Federal education programs by grounding them in scientifically based research. The Reading First State Grants program requires the use of curricula reflecting scientifically based reading research to help ensure that all students can read on grade level by the end of the third grade. Early Reading First is a complementary effort to jump-start this goal by infusing research-based pre-reading instruction into existing early education programs for disadvantaged children.

Early Reading First is designed to help provide preschool-aged children with cognitive learning opportunities in high-quality language and literacy-rich environments in order to enhance pre-reading skills and improve school readiness for children from low-income families. More specifically, projects provide ongoing professional development and materials, services, and activities aimed at fostering oral language development, phonological awareness, print awareness, and alphabet knowledge. Funded at \$104 million in fiscal year 2005, Early Reading First currently serves about 28,000 children in 92 projects nationwide. Initial performance reports for Early Reading First are promising, suggesting that a majority of participants are achieving age-appropriate benchmarks on measures of vocabulary and alphabet recognition.

Mr. Chairman, you may know that Tennessee has three Early Reading First projects, including one in Wayne County that took part in the Department's Preschool Curriculum Evaluation Research Study. In a true example of research-to-practice, Wayne County is now using the results of that study to better prepare teachers and staff to implement a new curriculum. In particular, the project is now providing extensive professional development to teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators, including the use of facilitators to provide coaching and mentoring to teachers and staff.

Another program that provides significant support for early childhood education—though an often-overlooked one—is Title I, which provides preschool services to about 2 percent of participants, or about 400,000 children, at an estimated annual cost of about \$500 million. As research increasingly confirms the value of high-quality preschool education

and its potential for improving later academic achievement, the Department is working to provide leadership and guidance in helping States and school districts create effective preschool programs that develop cognitive and early reading skills and contribute to school readiness. Key strategies in this effort are the promotion of the scientifically based methods of Early Reading First to strengthen Title I preschool programs, and encouraging States and school districts to use Title I funding to increase the education component of other existing preschool programs.

Other major ED early childhood programs are those authorized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These include Special Education Preschool Grants and Grants for Infants and Families. The \$385 million Preschool Grants program supplements funds provided under the IDEA Grants to States program to help States and school districts serve about 700,000 children with disabilities ages 3 through 5, with the goal of ensuring that these children start school ready to succeed.

The Grants for Infants and Families program provides formula grants to assist States in implementing a coordinated statewide system of early intervention services for children with disabilities, from birth to age 2, and their families. This \$441 million program will serve an estimated 286,000 children with disabilities in fiscal year 2005.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Department of Education continues to play a major role, in concert with other Federal agencies, in advancing the President's goal of improving the quality of early childhood education and care, especially for children most at risk of later failure in school. In particular, the Department has taken the lead in promoting the use of scientifically based research to improve interventions at all levels of education, including interventions that improve school readiness skills, such as oral language development, pre-reading skills, and social development. We also are committed to measuring results, and to using those results—as recommended by the GAO five years ago—to streamline and consolidate our programs in order to provide more efficient delivery of effective early childhood education services.

I will be happy to take any questions you may have.