



Friends of the Family, Inc.

Proposal for Integrating Education and Child Development

“Early childhood, which is the period in a child’s life from birth through age 5, is a critical time for children to develop the physical, emotional, social, and cognitive skills they will need for the rest of their lives...Most States have limited alignment between what children are doing before they enter school and what is expected of them once they are in school.”

Good Start, Grow Smart: The Bush Administration’s Early Childhood Initiative

There can no longer be any doubt that the foundations of lifelong learning and well-being are based on the experiences of early childhood, which form, in the words of the National Research Council, “either a sturdy or fragile stage for what follows.” Maryland has invested in many programs – from the Maryland Model for School Readiness to credentialing and accreditation for child care providers to Family Support Centers and Judy Centers – to improve the early experiences of the State’s children. These programs have the potential to move the State toward the achievement of one of its foremost goals – that all children arrive at school with the skills and competencies they need to succeed in school.

And yet, barely half of incoming kindergartners in Maryland are assessed as ready to learn. Many of these children lack basic cognitive, social, and communication skills necessary to progress in school. They lack quality early education and care experiences that will give them the knowledge and skills they need to be successful during their early years in school, throughout their academic careers, and later in life.

The State’s early care and education programs face numerous challenges. One of these is that they are spread among different State agencies. The early care and education programs could get a no-cost boost in effectiveness if they were housed in a single agency that had as its core mission the continuum of learning from birth through high school.

In addition to becoming more effective, programs would become more cost-efficient since a single agency would be able to eliminate duplicative administrative overhead, redundant training and technical assistance structures, and overlapping services. The result would be the delivery of more and better services for every dollar spent.

The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), which now houses a number of the major programs, should be re-envisioned to become the Department of Education and Child Development. As such, it would provide a home for all the programs that nurture and educate the State's children. The benefits of such a reorganization would be substantial:

1. All programs would be housed in an agency that approaches its work through an asset-based model, one that identifies strengths and builds on them.
2. The State's involvement in early care would be understood as beneficial to all children, not just disadvantaged children.
3. Located in a single department, programs could more easily be aligned to support development from birth to completion of high school. The department being held accountable for children's educational achievement would be in a far stronger position to effect that goal.
4. Early education programs would be housed in a department that views their success as critical to the department's core mission. This would ensure more reliable support from the administration, including more reliable funding.

Early care and education programs have been working in a State structure that does not convey these four advantages, and the negative potential of that situation was writ large in the 2003 and 2004 legislative sessions. Important early care and education programs housed in the Department of Human Resources (DHR) experienced budget cuts wildly disproportionate to overall cuts in the DHR budget – cuts which were rationalized, in part, by statements that child care is not part of DHR's core mission. In the aftermath of cuts to child care and family support programs, advocates have concluded that early care and education programs need to find a home within a department that gives priority to their work and shares their asset-based approach.

By joining early care and education programs with K through 12 education, the State would acknowledge and build on the ground-breaking contributions MSDE has already made in bridging K -12 to early care and education, e.g. the Judy Centers and Maryland Model for School Readiness. Furthermore, the move would allow a single agency to have purview over the full continuum of learning that affects educational outcomes – outcomes for which MSDE is being held accountable by the federal No Child Left Behind Act and Maryland's Bridge to Excellence Act. The new approach would extend the State's commitment to educational best practices by stressing accountability, pursuing quality improvement through research-based programs, and achieving cohesiveness in a system that supports children and families in their growth and development during their formative years.

The logic of consolidating early care and education with K to 12 is so strong that the idea has taken hold among advocates and members of the education community. For reasons that are practical as well as philosophical, structural as well as conceptual, the status quo is simply unacceptable. Creating a new, unified agency will demonstrate Maryland's recognition of the critical importance of early care--and its commitment to children in the beginning stage of the continuum of their education.