

**Michigan Coalition for Children and Families
Children's Agenda 2007**

INVESTING IN THE EARLY YEARS

"The quality of life for a child and the contributions the child makes to society as an adult can be traced back to the first few years of life"

Rolnik, A. & Grunewald, R. *Early Childhood Development: Economic Development with a High Public Return*, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis

Brain science research now confirms that what happens – or doesn't – in a child's first days, months and years has a critical impact, for good or bad, on that child's later learning and success. Scientific evidence tells us that by the time children reach school age much of the intellectual and emotional wiring of their brains is set. When young children receive positive and nurturing care, are physically active and intellectually challenged by their parents and other caregivers, their brains' very architecture is affected, creating the neuron connections that lay the foundation for intelligence and behavior.

Many states are taking this evidence as a call to action, recognizing that to become competitive in the knowledge-driven economy of the 21st century, they must invest in creating a highly educated workforce. Key to these new investments is the understanding that learning begins at birth, and that investments in supporting parents and other adults who provide care for young children will pay off significantly as these children grow to become healthy, curious and active learners.

It is in our state's best interests to develop and implement a comprehensive system of early childhood services and supports for all young children and their families in Michigan.

Provide parenting education and support right from the start.

Parents are their children's first and primary teachers. All parents need access to the knowledge, skills and support it takes to ensure the healthiest outcomes for their infants and young children.

- **Provide access to pre-conceptual care and early prenatal care for all pregnant women.** In 2004, almost one-quarter of mothers of newborns in Michigan had not received adequate prenatal care that started in the first trimester and included the recommended number of visits throughout the pregnancy. For African-American and Hispanic women, the percent receiving inadequate prenatal care was even higher. Numerous research studies have documented better delivery and birth outcomes for both mother and baby who receive adequate prenatal care.
- **Expand funding for parenting education.** Evidence-based parenting education programs for parents with young children, like Parents as Teachers and the Nurse-Family Partnership, are not available in many communities across the state.
- **Expand infant mental health and other home visiting services for expectant parents and families with infants and toddlers.** Home visiting and other family support programs have been shown to improve parenting skills, and positively affect children's development and learning.
- **Provide oversight of special education child find procedures and assessment for infants, toddlers and preschoolers, especially infants and toddlers in foster care.**

Ensure that all young children have access to high quality early care and education experiences. In Michigan, nearly half a million young children, or three of every five children from birth to age 6, have both parents or their single parent in the labor force. Due to economic changes and stricter work requirements for welfare recipients and applicants over the past decade, young children in Michigan are increasingly spending more time in the care of someone other than a parent. To ensure the best outcomes for our youngest children, it is essential that the non-parental care they receive when their parents are at work is of the highest quality. Factors that strongly affect the quality of child care and early education settings include adequate education, training and compensation for early childhood teachers and caregivers; high quality program standards; adequately enforced licensing and regulation; parent and family involvement; and linkages to community resources.

- **Increase the child care subsidy rate (now at the 1996 rate) to current market rates.** Michigan currently pays child care providers at a subsidy rate based on the 1996 Market Rate Survey. The Market Rate Survey is done every two years, but no change has occurred in reimbursement rates to reflect changes in inflation and the cost of delivering services.
- **Increase the number of child care licensing consultants to oversee quality and safety standards.** The number of child care consultants in Michigan has steadily decreased, from a high of 110 in the 1990's to 80 in 2000. *Today, the state's 61 child care licensing consultants carry some of the highest caseloads in the country.* At 295:1; these caseloads are nearly four times higher than the recommended level of 75:1. High licensing consultant caseloads compromise the safety and quality of child care for young children across the state. With reasonable caseloads, consultants can form relationships of trust with providers; provide training, technical assistance and support; and help providers comply with licensing and other quality standards.
- **Require training for child care providers who receive state subsidies.** Research confirms the strong correlation between the education levels of early care providers and the quality of care provided.
- **Expand services to prevent expulsion from child care.** As the numbers of young children in child care grow, child care providers are facing increasing amounts of challenging behaviors from the children in their care. Consequently, young children with behavior problems are being expelled from child care at a growing rate. Early childhood mental health consultation services help parents and providers develop strategies and skills to work with all children and promote the social-emotional competence that young children need to succeed in school and in life.
- **Increase the per slot allotment for the Michigan School Readiness Program (MSRP), which has not increased since 2001.** There is solid research evidence that children who attend high quality preschool programs are more likely to succeed in school, are less likely to need special education services, and are more likely to graduate from high school on time. Research has also shown that quality programs can improve student achievement scores in math and science, and reduce racial and ethnic disparities in educational achievement. However, MSRP providers have had no increases in the per-slot allotment for six years, threatening access and quality. School districts and private providers have been subsidizing the programs with other funding, which may not be available as financial pressures in the state increase.

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