

# Preliminary Report of the South Carolina Task Force on Early Childhood Quality Standards Executive Summary

## Background

At the request of the South Carolina General Assembly,<sup>1</sup> 20 task force members were seated, including professional leaders from both public and private early childhood settings, the business and advocacy communities, education policy arena, legislative leaders, gubernatorial appointees, and parents of young children.

## Inquiry

The Task Force has used four methods of data collection during its work to date:

1. Testimony from state and national experts (n=12)
2. Key SC stakeholder focus groups (n= 8, totaling 63 participants)
3. Regional **Early Childhood Quality Standards Town Hall Meetings** (n=5, totaling 130 participants)
4. SC Citizens' Early Childhood Quality Survey (n= 1,600)

## Findings

### 1. Quality Matters. Quality Interactions Matter Most.

While both structural program components (ex: adult:child ratios, group size) and process elements (ex: curricula, materials) contribute greatly to a program's overall quality, research suggests that ***it is the quality of interaction between caregivers and the children in their care that makes the most profound difference.*** South Carolina stakeholders and citizens also overwhelmingly identified these interactions as the most important determinant of quality in their view.

### 2. Teacher Training Counts.

***In order to maximize the young child's development, it is critical that teachers receive specialized training in both pedagogy and child development.*** The level of educational attainment associated with the strongest child development outcomes remains subject to some controversy, however. While many researchers and advocates suggest that a bachelor's degree from a formal teacher education program should be required of all early childhood providers, some of the strongest evidence to date remains linked to the Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential. While this threshold remains somewhat hazy, one thing is certain: at a minimum, South Carolina should be taking steps to ensure specialized training for its early education workforce.

### 3. Quality Costs. Financing Solutions Are Key to Promoting Excellence.

Of all the reasons that high quality early childhood programming remains largely elusive, one factor stands head and shoulders above the rest: ***quality care is expensive, costly to parents and providers alike.*** The Task Force recognizes that neither standards nor any proposed rating system can exist in a vacuum. ***Indeed, a rating system enacted independently of provider supports and incentives can serve only to assist affluent parents in identifying niche providers, rather than assisting all providers to increase quality for all South Carolina's children.***

## Next Steps

The Task Force now begins the second critical phase of its work. Key deliverables in this phase include: (1) concrete proposals through which to operationalize its initial recommendations (below), and (2) the development of additional quality standards/ benchmarks for the state's early childhood programs which:

- expand or adapt the state's existing quality levels to create a voluntary tiered rating system for use by consumers (to be enacted in conjunction with *systemic supports and incentives* as detailed in *Recommendation One* below.),
- reflect current best-practices, evidence-based research, and early learning standards for young children,
- establish clear levels of quality, containing precise, measurable standards,
- are respectful of the diversity and philosophical differences marking the state's existing early childhood service providers.

The Task Force has seated a sub-committee for the work of this phase, who may draw upon the important expertise offered by various agency personnel, stakeholder groups and other knowledgeable individuals - both locally and nationally - to build a high caliber, widely endorsed final product. The subcommittee will provide regular updates to the full Task Force and present its final recommendations for the group's endorsement by September 1, 2007. The Task Force will present its final report to Governor Sanford and the South Carolina General Assembly by November 1, 2007.

<sup>1</sup> **Proviso 1.80 of the General Appropriations Act of 2006-2007: (0 to 4 Year Old Standards)** The First Steps State Office must convene a task force to develop quality standards for programs serving children ages 0 to 4. Membership must include both public and private providers and is to be chaired by the Director of the First Steps State Office. A report must be issued to members of the General Assembly and the Governor's Office by January 9, 2007.

# Initial Task Force Recommendations

**Recommendation One: Create a Quality Based Incentive System (QBIS) for the state's early care and education providers and the South Carolina families who access their services. Begin by implementing incentives that support provider participation and advancement within the state's current three level quality program.**

- **Incentives to Families**

- Establish tax incentives (refundable consumer tax credits, deductions or earned income credits) for families choosing to enroll their children in settings that surpass minimum licensing standards - with the size of the incentive linked to the quality of the provider.
- Use state funds to expand childcare scholarships for low-income families. Require, as feasible, the use of these funds in settings that surpass minimum licensing standards.
- Explore funding *supplements* to the state's existing federal vouchers that would enable low income families to access higher quality care.
- Reevaluate the state's existing – but rarely utilized - employer tax incentives linked to childcare (SC Code 12-6-3440), and explore methods of enhancing and/or better publicizing these incentives to encourage their use.

- **Incentives to Providers**

- Establish a low-interest *loan to grant* program designed to assist providers in reaching enhanced levels of quality.
- Establish business tax credits/deductions (property tax discounts, income tax abatement, etc.) linked to program quality.
- Expand focused technical assistance linked to quality enhancement.

- **Incentives to Early Childhood Educators**

- Utilize South Carolina's T.E.A.C.H. (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps) Program to encourage professional development amongst entry-level early childhood professionals.
- Establish state-funded salary supplements and/or refundable tax credits/deductions for early childhood professionals linked to their levels of educational attainment.

**Recommendation Two: Provide consumer tools which allow South Carolina families to locate and access quality early childhood services.**

- Create a user-friendly web-based system to provide consumers with a means to access information and differentiate between provider options.
- Develop a marketing plan to make parents and other interested stakeholders aware of the web-based system and its uses.

**Recommendation Three: Integrate existing resources for providers in order to better promote and support increased quality in early childhood settings.**

- Expand current licensing and monitoring staff to meet the increased structural demands likely to be associated with the introduction of a Quality Based Incentive System (QBIS) in South Carolina. Modify the state's technical assistance efforts to support the QBIS.
- Increase the coordination of professional development, training and on-site technical assistance efforts of First Steps, the SC Department of Social Services, the SC Department of Education, the SC Center for Child Care Career Development, Child Care Resource and Referral, Success by 6, and South Carolina's higher education programs. Work to create a seamless support system for providers.
  - Increase participation in the T.E.A.C.H. program, with an emphasis upon "vertical training" designed to advance teacher credentials and matching incentives tied to their attainment.
  - Increase T.E.A.C.H. enrollment through improved outreach to providers and administrators. Identify barriers to participation and develop strategies to reduce or eliminate these obstacles.
  - Increase participation in college-level early childhood coursework by removing barriers for providers (ex: timing and locations of courses offered, provision of substitutes for early childhood classes while teachers participate in coursework, remedial instruction as needed to enable entry to college level coursework).
  - Reexamine the requirements for annual provider training to reduce the existing emphasis on "clock hours" in favor of training or continuing education designed to advance teacher credentials.
- Target entry-level professionals whose interest in teaching young children can be identified in S.C.'s high schools.
  - Work to develop articulation agreements between high school early childhood education classes and technical college credential and degree programs.
- Encourage quality in home- and family-based provider settings through a voucher/scholarship program tied to performance-based incentives.
- Work to standardize or consolidate data collection, monitoring and reporting efforts across programs. Include data that will enable long-term outcomes measurement.