



## *National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education*

Good afternoon, I am Rolf Grafwallner, Assistant Superintendent of the Maryland Department of Education's Division of Early Childhood Development. Today I am speaking on behalf of the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education – the countrywide organization for state education agency staff members with major responsibilities in the field of early childhood education, from infancy through the primary grades. We commend you for seeking our voice in this process and we are pleased to share with you the key principles and recommendations that will guide my remarks today. In the process, I will also share some important cautions and ask a few questions.

### **KEY PRINCIPLES**

Following are principles that frame all policy recommendations from NAECS-SDE on education and early learning initiatives:

- Learning progresses on a continuum beginning at birth. Later learning is optimized when *built* on this foundational progression. The scope and sequence of education starts early and “pays forward,” not the reverse.
- Learning is multi-dimensional at all levels of the continuum.
- Birth to age eight is a critical period where the physical, social and emotional domains, along with a child's approaches to learning, are vital and integral to their successful cognitive development.
- That said, a “whole child” approach – an intentional, developmental, and continued focus on these multiple domains of learning – is as foundational to success in high school as it is in preschool. *AND*, this is true across all academic content areas.
- “Soft skills” is a misnomer – knowledge and skills in each of these domains are essential for academic and life success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- “Developmentally effective practice” is a term of note with implications for every grade-level from pre-school to grad-school.
- Just as inattention to a particular age-level, grade, or subject area results in debilitating gaps in the learning continuum; similarly, developmentally inappropriate practice undermines effective learning and outcomes at every age and every grade level.
- Parents are paramount. Parents should be engaged, enabled, and empowered to optimize their children's learning and development from birth through college and career.
- Teachers are paramount. Those who care for and teach young children require and deserve access to practical, evidence-based, age appropriate pre-service and ongoing

professional development. And they are due parity with similarly credentialed positions in the later years of schooling.

- Transitions are *always* important, and they are *particularly* important for younger learners. Effective transition should focus on: building and sustaining relationships (children to teachers, families to personnel at the leaving and entering of programs); sustaining developmental continuity in program and classroom practices (including transferring information about the developmental and learning status of the child); and lastly, addressing the procedural issues of multiple programs in the service of individual children.

## CAUTIONS

These principles provide some explicit cautions for the reauthorization of the ESEA which will no doubt be expressed during this “listening session” with my colleagues and which will be raised as these considerations proceed.

- Chief among our concerns is the application of assessments to the years before third grade, particularly for high stakes purposes. Without devoting too much of our limited time here, we urge you to pay close attention to the prolific study presented to the Congress and to the Department by the National Academies,<sup>1</sup> and request that we be enlisted in the ongoing thinking that proceeds from this meeting related to the collection of information about young learners. Our members will readily volunteer.
- We also urge that the entire continuum from “cradle to career” be afforded your “undivided” attention during this reauthorization. The recently released Head Start Impact Study<sup>2</sup> underscores that we hazard elementary and secondary school success (indeed, ultimately the life success of our children) if we do not tend to the quality of the kindergarten and primary classrooms – and the instruction therein – to which Head Start children transition.
- Discrete laws, and their resulting offices, titles, and programs often result in the disjointed, segregation of services to children. We know this can be counter productive to the comprehensive nature of learning at all ages, and especially to the systemic character of early childhood development and learning and the continuity alluded to in our key principles.
- During times of limited resources, we must not fail to do the right thing because it might divert resources from “the other right thing.” An expanded role for early childhood education in the US Department of Education should and will complement the array of programs and services at the Department of Health and Human Services. States are modeling that this can work and the Early Childhood Study Groups, along with the collaborative offices of Drs. Lombardi and Jones are evidence that the path has been laid for successful collaboration at the federal level.

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<sup>1</sup> NAS Report – Early Childhood Assessment: Why, What, and How – [www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=12446](http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12446)

<sup>2</sup> Head Start Impact Study 2020 – [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/hs/impact\\_study/](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/hs/impact_study/)

## QUESTIONS

I would like to inject a few questions that this reauthorization raises for us as state agency stakeholders, most of us charged with managing multiple programs:

- Where will other initiatives, such as the Early Childhood Advisory Councils, the Early Childhood Challenge Grants, and the Striving Readers legislation fit into the reauthorization context?
- How will the ESEA and the upcoming Child Care and Development Fund reauthorizations complement and strengthen one another?
- How can state education agencies require or motivate local school district collaboration with other early childhood programs and services?
- Can the data being collected to show school success and school improvement be expanded to include more than school or learning outcomes? Can data on community resources, teacher practices, home practices (parent education) and other topics be included so that a more complete picture of a child's learning environment is available for decision making?

We pose these questions in view of our central principles and cautions and to support our recommendations. We know this is just the beginning of this very important endeavor and we pledge to support these principles in working with you to find their answers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

And so we arrive at our recommendations. Starting BIG, and moving to the more specific, these are our recommendations:

- We recommend a NEW Early, Elementary and Secondary Education Act (EESEA) with a discrete title for early learning from birth through third grade—call it the FIRST TITLE, if you will—that begins and integrates with all other titles of the act.
- Include provisions for states to require school districts to initiate a strategic planning process to improve school readiness for traditionally disadvantaged and for all students by addressing the areas of teacher quality, curriculum implementation, and comprehensive services, such as health and family involvement in programs serving preschool age children.
- Establish and fund a program (from existing or new resources) to support formal partnerships with school districts and early childhood programs, including standards defining early childhood outcomes, teacher and classroom quality, curriculum, and assessment for the provision of high quality early childhood services.
- Require local school districts to strategically align high quality early education services in school attendance areas of high poverty and/or with school improvement needs—particularly those lowest performing schools.
- Add incentives for school districts to integrate and braid the spectrum of current ESEA and IDEA dollars for early learning, including and highlighting the benefits of collaboration with community early childhood partners.

- Require intentional, research-based transition practices among the programs serving children throughout the day, throughout the year, and along the learning continuum from birth to the end of third grade.
- Require districts to incorporate a thorough scan of their “feeder systems” and provide incentives for districts to include comprehensive early childhood programming and services in school improvement planning for elementary, middle and high schools.
- Require and provide funding for the inclusion of early childhood educators in school district professional development systems as appropriate.
- Create a central mechanism in the US Department of Education for the provision of technical assistance, professional development and capacity building for the managers/directors of state early childhood education systems
- Rethink and reconstruct the mechanics of current compliance provisions of the ESEA to allow flexibility to meet the intentions of these recommendations, harmonizing regulations to facilitate merging of resources at the local level. This is consistent with many of the principles noted above, such as those for transition. Good practice is hindered if the various funding streams have conflicting, overlapping or additive regulations, including those for supplement/ not supplant and maintenance of effort.

I will close quickly, noting that these remarks are posted on our website above those submitted a year ago as we sought a “seat at the table” during the new administration’s transition.<sup>3</sup> We are more than heartened that many of those recommendations have been realized, and we stand ready to link arms in this next step in this process. Please do not hesitate to engage us going forward.

THESE REMARKS ARE POSTED AT [www.naecs-sde.org/policy](http://www.naecs-sde.org/policy).

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<sup>3</sup> NAECS-SDE Recommendations to the Obama Administration on early childhood – [www.naecs-sde.org/policy](http://www.naecs-sde.org/policy)