



National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families

July 20, 2009

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The Honorable George Miller, Chairman
Committee on Education and Labor
2181 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable John Kline, Ranking Member
Committee on Education and Labor
2101 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Miller and Ranking Member Kline:

ZERO TO THREE would like to commend you for your continued commitment to ensuring the healthy development of our youngest children. The creation of the Early Learning Challenge Fund (ELCF) in Title IV of the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2009 (H.R. 3221) is a clear recognition of the importance of strong birth-to-five early care and education experiences in helping young children succeed in school and in life.

Rapid brain development in the earliest years of life makes this a period of great vulnerability for infants and toddlers enduring risk factors such as poverty, parental substance abuse, community and family violence, and parental depression. But it is also a time of great opportunity to provide high quality early care and education programs that can act as protective buffers against the multiple adverse influences that may hinder a young child's development in all domains. Too often we focus on programs that target children after weak early foundations for learning have already been laid. We need to make a concerted effort to start earlier, before children come to preschool already behind, before parents struggling to balance work and family find that their child care arrangements have not met their children's developmental needs, and before early developmental delays become full-blown developmental disabilities.

While we know that comprehensive programs and services addressing early care and education, physical and mental health, and family support are essential, they are only as strong as the infrastructure that supports them. To be effective, programs must be organized within cohesive systems that coordinate and align a broad array of services. The ELCF would create such a cohesive system by coordinating early care and education efforts within states and across agencies, promoting high quality services for low-income children 0-5, implementing effective governance structures, developing early learning standards, aligning new programs with existing services, and strengthening professional development activities and outreach to families.

We applaud the creation of the ELCF as a significant step forward for our youngest and most vulnerable infants and toddlers. As you consider this legislation in full Committee, we hope that you will keep in mind the importance of also strengthening and expanding existing programs that support children and families—programs such as Head Start and Early Head Start, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, and Part C Early Intervention services. These programs provide core services which lay the foundation on which our youngest children build their future success. Without the services, a system cannot exist; without the system, there is no coordination of services. These two critical pieces complement each other and must go hand in hand in helping to ensure that our most at-risk infants and toddlers continue to learn and develop the skills they need to succeed in school and in life.

We look forward to working with you on the ELCF and the base programs upon which it builds in order to continue to strengthen our nation's youngest children, now and for generations to come.

Sincerely,

Matthew Melmed, Executive Director