

**Testimony of Jane Knitzer, Ed.D.
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My name is Jane Knitzer. I am the Deputy Director of the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) and, on behalf of the Center, I very much appreciate the opportunity to testify before you on how states are seeking to enhance the well-being of infants and toddlers, preschoolers, and their families.

The National Center for Children in Poverty is a nonpartisan research organization that is part of the Columbia University School of Public Health. Our mission is to identify and promote strategies to reduce poverty and to improve the life chances of low-income young children (from birth to age six) and their families. NCCP conducts state-by-state demographic analyses of young child poverty rates (see Appendix A), and carries out research intended to improve policies and practices for young children and their families. For example, we are part of the team documenting the lessons learned from Starting Points, the initiative of the Carnegie Corporation to help states and communities focus attention on young children and families.

Every two years, NCCP also issues a report entitled *Map and Track: State Initiatives for Young Children and Families*. This report identifies existing state programs for young children, if individual states are encouraging community planning efforts on behalf of young children, and if states have made enhancing outcomes for young children a priority at the highest levels of government. The report also provides state-specific information on demographic indicators of young

child and family well-being and information about welfare decisions of special relevance to young children. All 50 states provide data and review the profiles before publication.

In my testimony today I would like to do four things: first, describe briefly the overall findings from the 1998 edition of *Map and Track*, second, highlight some of the states' major strategies, particularly giving examples of public-private partnerships; third, identify some of the critical issues the report raised; and fourth, talk about the implications for future state and federal policies.

The Overall Findings

There is growing recognition across the states about the importance of developing comprehensive programs for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. These programs are comprehensive in the sense that they seek to enhance the young child's development, help parents meet the challenges of parenting and link both parents and children to other needed support services (See Appendix B for an overview map).

- Almost half of the states (24) report supporting statewide comprehensive programs for infants and toddlers. Since 1996, ten states have started or added new programs. These new programs appear to be at least in part developed in response to the emerging information about the importance of early brain development in young children. Funding levels range from one or two million dollars to \$31 million.

Program strategies include: outreach to new parents (typically, these aim to be universal); comprehensive programs for high-risk infants and toddlers; parenting education and family support initiatives to provide basic information to families and to strengthen infant-parent relationships; and, initiatives to meet special needs (for example, programs to meet the needs of parents with mental illness or substance abuse).

- Thirty-four states report expanding or supplementing existing programs for pre-school age children. State expenditures for these programs range from \$300,000 to \$200 million.

Program strategies include comprehensive prekindergarten programs, state support for Head Start, parent education, family support and family literacy

efforts, and "enabling grants" to communities to design a mix of services tailored to community needs.

- Ten states report explicit, deliberate efforts to link these types of comprehensive programs with the implementation of welfare reform.

These states report three strategies: using TANF and/or state dollars to expand or target services to families with young children receiving or at risk of receiving welfare; explicitly encouraging parents to participate in parenting programs either in lieu of, or in tandem with, work requirements, and giving priority for enrollment in comprehensive programs to young children in families receiving or at risk of receiving public assistance.

There is also recognition of the importance of looking beyond support for individual "programs" to supporting the development of systems of early care and education. Thus a growing number of states report efforts to engage community stakeholders in planning processes to better meet the needs of the young children and families in their communities. Most typically these efforts are linked to state-level planning and broader systems reform efforts.

- Just over half (27) of the states report community mobilization strategies linked with state-level strategies to promote systemic change on behalf of children. Fourteen of these have a clear focus on young children and families.

The process by which states are implementing these new planning and systems varies. For example, Hawaii has developed Good Beginnings, a public-private partnership focusing on children that works through a state-level council with four counties to develop community-based partnerships as well. In Georgia, much of the planning and community mobilization takes place through the public/private state Family Policy Council, which works with community partnerships to achieve five designated results for children, including for the youngest, ensuring that they enter school ready to learn.

The extent and type of commitment to young children and families varies considerably from state to state. Some states report only programs, others program and community mobilization strategies. Only a handful of states report sustained, high-level comprehensive initiatives that encompass a variety of state-initiated strategies.

- In 1998, eight states, Colorado, Georgia, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Vermont, and West Virginia, met our criteria for comprehensive initiatives – some combination of high-level leadership, integrated program and community mobilization strategies, continued commitment to increased funding, and a framework for state action. These were the same eight states identified in the 1996 edition of *Map and Track*.

The Issues

The national picture that emerges then is mixed. The good news is that there is widespread recognition of the importance of developing supportive early learning experiences. More and more states appear to be recognizing that promoting the well-being of young children and families is everybody's business: parents, business leaders, community leaders, and services providers. There has been an increase in the number of programs for infants and toddlers and their families, and an expansion of support for preschoolers in most of the states that have already recognized the importance of early learning experiences for children.

A trend is also visible toward providing enabling funds to communities (or sometimes school districts) encouraging them to design services that are tailored to the particular needs of a community. Further, although overall levels of state investments in comprehensive programs for young children and families remain relatively low, the number of programs with increases in funding over a two-year period outweighs those with reduced funding.

At the same time, there are clear inequities across the states in access to comprehensive programs, in funding levels, and in leadership. There are still no statewide programs for infants and toddlers in 26 states, and none for preschoolers in 16 states. Most troubling, only 20% of the states report deliberate efforts to ensure a focus on young children in implementing welfare reform. Even fewer states report any efforts to respond to issues of great concern to practitioners – the level of stress in many families with young children, often related to domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental illness, as well as challenging behaviors in young children. A few states, such as Vermont, are partnering with mental health, substance abuse, and early intervention agencies to invent a secondary support system to help these most vulnerable families, but special national attention to this issue is required.

With respect to the use of public-private partnerships focused on the well-being of young children and families, states are taking a variety of approaches. In

some instances, the public-private partnership involves foundations and government either within the states or across multiple states. In other instances, such as Colorado Bright Beginnings, the business community is deeply engaged in the partnerships. In still other instances, the aim is to engage a broad variety of stakeholders at the community level – making sure that early childhood is everybody's business. For example, this is the strategy of the North Carolina Smart Start Partnership for North Carolina's Children. Smart Start, now in 55 of the state's counties, and soon to be statewide, joins local partners from the public sector, private sector, and families to improve access to health care and the quality of early childhood services for its young children. A statewide public-private partnership provides leadership, technical assistance, and resource development. In Florida, there has been a major effort to "partner" in a different way with key policy makers, providing them with information about early brain development.

The states providing the most leadership are using many different pathways to build a sustained commitment to young children and families over time. (See Appendix C for description of the initiatives in the eight states with the most comprehensive efforts..). For example, Colorado's First Impressions has four goals: (1) universal health care for children; (2) universal volunteer home visits and support for new parents; (3) improved quality, affordability, accessibility of child care; (4) and "child-oriented" communities. Colorado has used its Carnegie Corporation Starting Points grant to create the Warm Welcome program, and is involving the business community in paying for home visits as a benefit. Prior to that, Colorado invested in a prekindergarten program and developed a state-level management strategy to build a system of supports to young children and families, through a Children's Cabinet and a state-level management team. To strengthen the local infrastructure for early care and education the state has begun a pilot effort in 12 counties. It has also established a pilot mental health project for young children.

In West Virginia the approach is different. Starting Points Centers have been established as part of West Virginia's pre-existing community mobilization strategy, known as the Family Resource Network. These Centers in turn, are becoming the hubs for the delivery of a variety of services, including those related to welfare reform. The state has also funded a prekindergarten program. Leadership for the overall initiative is provided by the Early Childhood Implementation Commission which is a part of the Cabinet on Children and Families.

In Ohio, three basic goals drive the community mobilization and program development effort: ensuring access to early care and education for every family that wishes it, improving child health, and increasing family stability. The state began

with a state-level Family and Children First Council, then invited counties to develop their own councils. Initially in a few counties, such councils now exist in each of Ohio's 88 counties, with the state providing technical assistance and support. These councils are now beginning not to just plan, but also to manage resources. All have family members as part of them. The state has also invested significantly in a state-funded Head Start program, and most recently, in Early Start, an early intervention home visiting program for young children and families at risk by virtue of environmental and biological risk factors. (Particularly noteworthy is that the state has targeted TANF dollars for this program and made it available to those receiving or at risk of receiving welfare.)

The states providing the strongest leadership on behalf of young children and families share several characteristics. (1) The effort is bipartisan and involves leaders from both inside and outside the government. (2) Efforts to build community support co-exist with efforts to fund programs and increase resources for effective services. There is an interweaving of multiple, deliberate strategies. (3) In most instances, there is a clear framework for action, reflected in statements of basic goals for young children. (4) The states all started in different places, with different mixes of services and leadership, but the vision and the commitments have continued to evolve. (5) The need for more resources is critical; infrastructure development and community mobilization is necessary, but not sufficient. 6) New partnerships do bring new resources to the table.

Implications and Recommendations

Taken together, there are two central messages from *Map and Track*. First, states are making progress focusing on young children and families, but with some exemplary exceptions, neither state leadership nor state investment is deep enough across all the states. Second, *Map and Track* not only documents the current state of the art of early childhood initiatives but it also points to new directions that might be supported either by the states or the federal government or both, which are provided in detail below.

- Distinctions among different types of program approaches are blurring as states strive to create program approaches, whatever the age focus, to address parenting issues, child development issues and adult development issues, including literacy and employment skills.
- Flexibility in how dollars can be used, along with careful planning processes and accountability mechanisms, are critical. Program-by-program funding streams,

rigid eligibility, and funding criteria make developing supportive communities for young children more complex. States need to be able to mix and match dollars to help communities create the needed system of supports to young children and families that are tailored to community need.

- Building community support structures on behalf of young children and families takes time, technical assistance from the states or others, and seems to work best if there are clear objectives. Support for these activities can come from public or private funds, or some combination, but is crucial to the success of program efforts.
- Incentives to states to promote positive outcomes for young children and their families in the context of welfare reform is important, since so much of the effort to implement welfare reform is adult driven.
- Identifying and testing new strategies to help programs serving families with young children better meet the needs of the most troubled families would strengthen their efficacy.
- Investments are needed in evaluations of program, community mobilization or comprehensive state strategies on behalf of young children and families. Further, although states are setting outcome based goals, in many places, administrative data systems do not have the capacity to track these outcomes. The few evaluations that do exist, however, are encouraging.
- Sustaining systems-change efforts poses a challenge across the states. Efforts to expand understanding of the importance of investing in early childhood at all levels of government and with public-private partnerships may be key to ensuring that the efforts that are now underway will withstand changes in administrations.

Taken together this suggests ways in which federal initiatives might support state efforts; such an agenda might include ensuring that federal dollars can be used flexibly to enhance developmental outcomes for young children and families; providing incentives to states to develop comprehensive community mobilization, planning and networking capacity on behalf of young children and families; promoting positive outcomes for young children in families affected by welfare changes; developing consultation and other strategies to promote the well-being of young children at risk of poor learning and behavior disorder; and encouraging the

evaluation of statewide comprehensive programs for young children and families. Implementing such an agenda would go a long way to support the states in their efforts to ensure that the next generation does in fact, as the national goal calls for, enter school ready to learn.