

2004 MAINE CHILDREN'S CONGRESS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Maine, over 140,000 children ages 0-12 receive early education and school-age child care services from licensed programs or unlicensed care through relatives, neighbors or friends. Research on brain development and school readiness has shown that the experiences children have and attachments they form in the early years of life have a decisive, long-lasting impact. Children in quality early learning programs are more likely to attend college, have higher employment rates and earnings, and are less involved with the criminal justice system.

We have set a goal to ensure that all Maine children, ages 0-12, have the early learning opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. To achieve this goal, Maine needs a system of early education and school-age child care services that is rooted in quality; a system where all programs are adequately funded, held accountable and have the capacity to meet a common set of high quality standards. Yet, our system is still fragmented, comprised of disconnected programs (center-based and home-based child care, Head Start, public pre-k, and early intervention) with separate standards, monitoring, funding streams and outreach strategies.

The 2004 Maine Children's Congress, held on March 25-26, 2004, in Rockport, ME, provided a forum for over 150 early education and school-age child care professionals, policy-makers, state leaders, and advocates to plan action steps that address the fragmentation of programs and of the various initiatives implemented at the federal, state and local levels. The purpose of the Children's Congress was to begin the process of aligning programs and initiatives so that

they work together in a cohesive way. This is a necessity if we are to set a foundation of success for our children and youth.

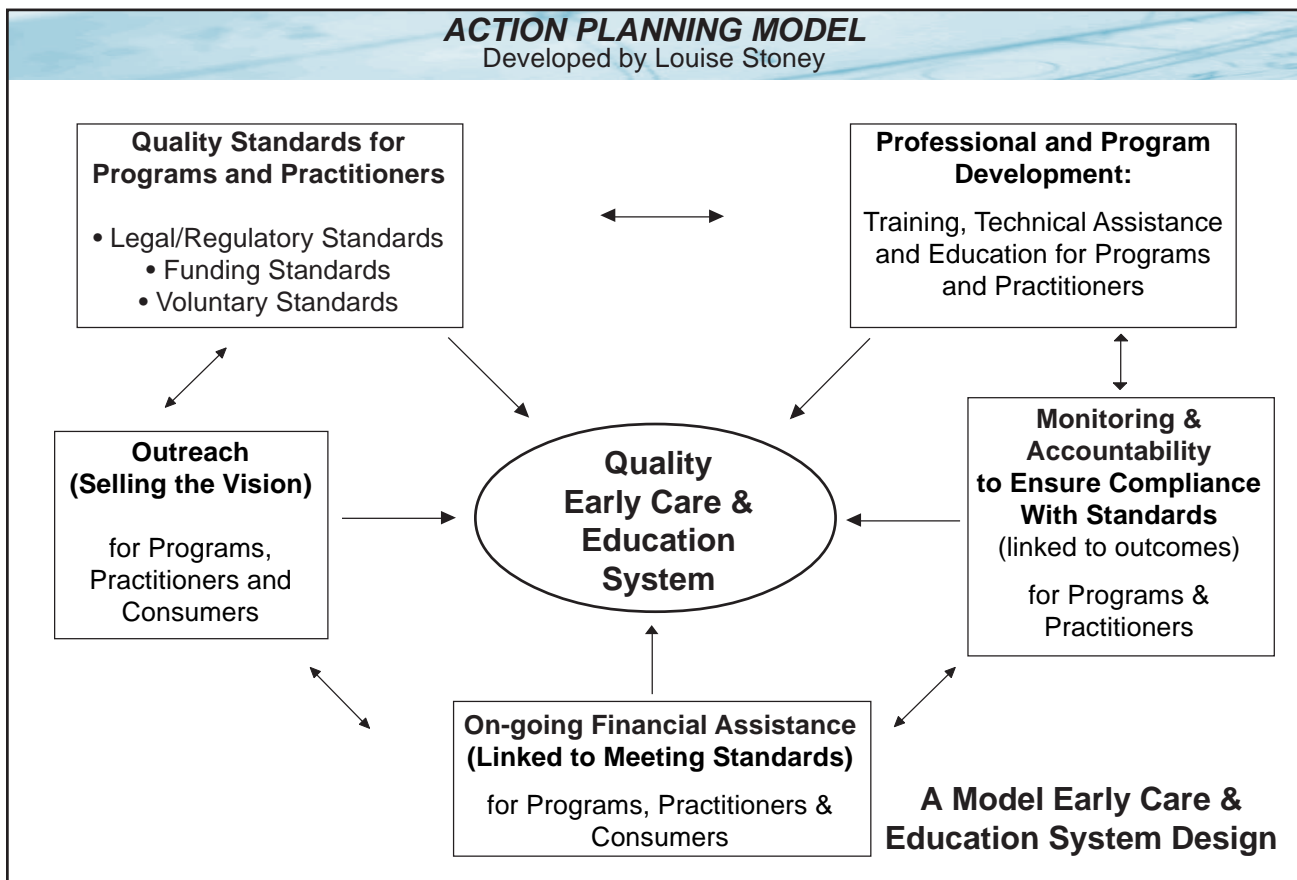
The Children's Congress used a simple planning model to ensure that the alignment is more purposeful and systemic. The model was developed and presented by Louise Stoney, a nationally recognized expert in government efforts to improve early education and child care quality, accountability, financing and quality rating systems. The graphic on the next page names each component of the model and shows how the components come together to support the whole. Additionally, each component is described with examples of promising practices to be replicated. The model served as the organizing framework for the keynote presentation, panel discussions and breakout sessions, helping participants from the different parts of the system to be on the same page and using the same language.

Maine early education and school-age child care programs have a long history of working collaboratively to build on to begin the hard work of aligning the various parts of the system into a cohesive whole. We are proud of our collaborative accomplishments, including the forming of ACCESS, blending child care and Head Start programs, crafting Early Childhood Learning Results, and the Task Force on Early Childhood (currently in the process of planning a system that links early care and education with other health and family support services). These examples represent a lot of hard work and a lot of relationship-building that will form the basis for the work ahead of us.

The 2004 Maine Children's Congress was underwritten with major funding from the Alliance for Children's Care, Education and Supporting Services (ACCESS); Kennebec-Somerset, Cumberland County, Western Maine and Coastal Local ACCESS Collaboratives; Maine Child Care Directors Association; Child Development Services; and the Center for Community Inclusion. *Sources of Funding:* Head Start Collaboration Grant, Maine Department of Human Services, Office of Child Care and Head Start and the Early Learning Opportunities federal grant (#90LO0069), Child Care Bureau, ACYF/USDHHS. The Children's Congress is solely the responsibility of the planners and does not represent official views of the funding agency, nor does it constitute an endorsement by the funding agency.

ACTION PLANNING MODEL

Developed by Louise Stoney



Quality Standards Programs and Practitioners: Every part of the early care and education system has a set of standards for programs and practitioners. In some cases, these standards are legal requirements (e.g. licensing rules), or funding standards (e.g. Head Start Performance Standards), or community norms (e.g. parent definitions of quality). *A key part of reform is aligning the standards used by different parts of the system so that they work together.*

Professional and Program Development (Training, Technical Assistance and Education): Once common quality standards are established, steps must be taken to ensure that programs and practitioners receive assistance to meet and maintain the standards. This includes assistance for programs (e.g. technical assistance, evaluation, support groups, mini-grants) and practitioners (e.g. high-quality training, education, scholarships, loan forgiveness, mentoring). *The goal is to create a shared understanding of what is needed to meet quality standards.*

Monitoring and Accountability to Ensure Compliance with Standards: Standards cannot be upheld without a system to ensure that programs and practitioners comply with them. This means sufficient staff to monitor regulatory requirements, funding standards and quality benchmarks, an automated system to track program compliance, communication with referral

agencies, consumer education, accessible and relevant courses, credentials and degrees. *The goal is to unify the systems that hold programs and practitioners accountable for quality standards.*

On-going Financial Assistance (Linked to Meeting Standards) for Programs, Practitioners and Consumers: It is not possible to hold early childhood programs accountable for meeting standards if they do not have the resources to do so. Without funds to supplement revenue from parent fees, child care certificates, or scholarships, programs cannot be expected to offer quality services, retain qualified teachers, compensate teachers, and, thus, will not be able to maintain high quality standards over time. *Blended financial assistance that is linked to meeting standards is key to building an effective early care and education system.*

Outreach (Selling the Vision) for Programs, Practitioners and Consumers: System reform cannot work unless practitioners and consumers “buy into” what quality standards mean, why they are important, what they can do to comply, and how compliance will benefit them individually and collectively. They need to know what a high quality early childhood program looks and feels like. *The goal is to integrate approaches used to build program, practitioner and consumer buy-in for a quality system.*

BRINGING THE SYSTEM INTO ALIGNMENT

Systemic alignment can be accomplished in many ways. “Quality Rating” is one approach used by a number of states. The Children’s Congress provided resources on how quality rating systems have been used to align standards in Levels or Stars. Standards are not viewed as a single measure but rather as a continuum, with various levels of quality that build on one another. Program and professional development, monitoring, funding and outreach are aligned to support programs and professionals moving from one Level or Star to the next. Among the benefits, consumers have a concrete approach to easily understand quality; they can “count the stars.”

PRIORITY ACTION STEPS

The Children’s Congress compiled a list of: (a) standards for programs and practitioners currently used in Maine, (b) all the education and technical assistance resources available to programs and practitioners, (c) entities involved in program monitoring; (d) sources of funding and exploring how these can be linked to compliance with standards; and (e) methods used to build buy-in from programs, practitioners and consumers for a quality system. (See *Resources to Support Systemic Alignment of Maine’s Early Education and School-age Child Care Systems* available at www.accessforme.org). The Children’s Congress took the next step and recommended priority action steps:

Quality Standards for Programs and Practitioners

1. Conduct a review of state quality rating to determine: (a) their process; (b) how well is it working, and (c) how well would it work for Maine.
2. Develop a system to ensure communication and coordination among all early care and education committees and task forces.
 - Develop a complete list of all of the task forces and committees related to early care and education in Maine, building upon, *Early Care and Education Strategic Planning in Maine: A Summary of Current Activities*.
 - Determine where the work of the Children’s Congress fits into these committees and task forces.
 - Widely disseminate what these task forces and committees have done.
 - Explore feasibility of all task forces and committees reporting to one central body (e.g. Early Childhood Task Force).
3. Compile all quality standards in Maine: (a) develop a matrix, (b) conduct a crosswalk of current standards, and (c) compare and contrast them to determine which are aligned and which are not.

Professional and Program Development: Training, Technical Assistance and Education for Programs and Practitioners

1. Building on the work of the Resource Development Centers, Maine Roads to Quality and Early Childhood Higher Education Committee, create a continuum of training and education (based on common standards) by identifying universally accepted courses across systems and developing blended curriculums that are universally accepted across systems. Explore universal certification that would cover pre-k, elementary education, early childhood education and special education.
2. Develop a central information hub for available training across systems, substitute bank, national news, federal updates, linking the Resource Development System, Department of Education (DOE) and Child Development Services (CDS).
3. Establish a “University without walls” to support the increased alignment of training and certification/degree programs, building on the current work of the Early Childhood Higher Education Committee: degrees accepted by different systems; flexible formats for delivery using distance learning technologies; experiential learning internships; and Infant/Toddler, preschool, school-age content areas.

Monitoring and Accountability to Ensure Compliance with Standards (Linked to Outcomes) for Programs and Practitioners

1. Conduct a review of state quality rating system models (e.g. Colorado Educare).
2. Recruit parents and all consumers and include them in all phases of developing a monitoring system.
3. Conduct a crosswalk of standards, create common understanding and usage of language.
4. Develop core monitoring focal points (e.g. fiscal, quality, personnel, health and safety).
5. Develop a common/unified database for all monitoring systems.
6. Develop a quality rating system to drive the funding levels, link practitioners to salaries, link resources to needs, establish a common language, and encourage funders to use data about affordability.

On-Going Financial Assistance (Linked to Meeting Standards) for Programs, Practitioners and Consumers

1. Conduct review of how other states are using local/regional planning councils to manage and coordinate financial resources and subsidy management. ACCESS could take a lead.
2. Gather research on tax credits.
3. Gather information on how other states have utilized/accessed funds for school readiness. USA Childcare is holding a conference in late April about how other states fund enhancements for school readiness processes in their early childhood programs.
4. Establish position statement regarding pre-k programs/contracting in conversation with DOE. The CCAC reaches out to the DOE Early Childhood Specialist upon being hired and engages in conversations on pre-k programming and contracting.

5. Compile and publish creative, local initiatives for easy sharing on a web-site and at a one-day conference on creative funding for child care in Maine. Develop inroad to engage school superintendents.
6. Gather Early Learning Opportunities grantees to compile a summary of activities to present to policy makers.
7. Begin conversation regarding creating alignment of TANF and child care subsidy systems.
8. Develop methods to share inclusive universal training and technical assistance for all aspects of early learning system.
9. Connect with/support the sub-committee of the Early Childhood Task Force looking at economic impact. Suggest research question to subcommittee: Determine feasibility of getting information about where families who receive subsidies are working.

Outreach (Selling the Vision) for Programs, Practitioners and Consumers

1. Educate general public: professional marketing strategy; pediatricians and family practitioners.
2. Utilize media: regular column in newspapers with organized submissions (e.g. profile of local RDC, Head Start Family child care).
3. Coordinate/link web sites.
4. Integrate information of choosing quality child care into parenting/health.
5. Integrate information of quality child care into degree programs (e.g. business degrees learning about economic impact and needs of their labor force).

Contact:

Marilyn Russell
Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service
One Post Office Square
PO Box 15010
Portland, Maine 04112
(207)780-5830 voice
marilyn@usm.maine.edu

For a copy of Louise Stoney's paper entitled, *Early Care and Education System Reform: Key Elements*, visit www.earlychildhoodfinance.org.

For a copy of the *Children's Congress Executive Summary* and *Resources to Support Systemic Alignment of Maine's Early Education and School-age Child Care Systems*, visit www.accessforme.org.