



## Memorandum

To: Julie Pratt  
From: Nancy S. Tonkin  
Subject: Summary of issues and concerns on early childhood issues from legislators  
Date: November 6, 2013

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As requested, I met with legislators in leadership positions to discuss their general understanding of the early childhood education system and its needs. The interviews were either phone call discussions or sit-down meetings in their capitol offices during October 15-23, 2014. Obviously, the sit down meetings generated longer discussions and a better understanding of their awareness of the early childhood education system.

I interviewed thirteen legislators who have I believe the best exposure and interest in the young families, education issues and funding of services. Both Democrats and Republicans were selected. The legislators interviewed either chair or are ranking members of the following committees:

- Finance Committee
- Education Committee
- Health and Human Resources Committee
- Joint Committee on Children and Families (Interim)

The purpose was to assess the knowledge level by key legislators of the early childhood education system and to identify any specific concerns.

### Key Findings:

- Majority of legislators were not unaware of the executive order establishing the Task Force nor are that an early childhood plan is being submitted to the Governor in January. They did not hear about local meetings on the topic nor did any attend.
- Majority of older (incumbent) legislators are proud of the program established in 2002 to expand the Pre-K to 4 year olds (4-YO) and the recognition by other states of this remarkable achievement. “There is proven value” in the 4YO program. Most recognize or commented on the early brain development concept. One legislator says there are still some issues in “growth” counties accommodating this expansion because of lack of classroom space.

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- Most legislators discussed their concerns of additional state budget cuts (mostly Finance Committee members). It was mentioned there most likely will be another 7.5% cut implemented in November in addition to the one adopted in the FY 2014 budget we are operating under now and the one proposed in the FY 2015 budget (total of 22.5% reductions in certain line items).
- Several legislators mentioned the importance of the quality rating system for child care centers but were not quite sure how it is being implemented and if centers are taking advantage of it. There is interest by parents to make sure their children are getting more quality care than just watching videos for most of the day.
- Several commented on general concerns about families who cannot, or are unwilling, or do not know how to help their children prepare for future. There were several comments about the need to help families help their children. Several said it is critical to engage families to make the children successful. The recent focus on children and poverty was on their minds.
- One legislator asked, “What can we do to eradicate poverty?” Can we focus on it and make a difference? Let us examine and set out a plan to try to reduce the poverty level in our state.
- Two legislators expressed an interest in moving three year olds into the Pre-K program...similar to the 4 YO phase in. There is concern about reactions from WVEA and AFT regarding this move.
- Majority recognize importance of home visitation programs that assist families through family support programs. They recognize community-based programs make a difference in children’s lives. One legislator voiced concerns about lack of clarity / overlap / duplication of some programs. Suggested that all community groups have clear focus and communicate this to the legislature.

#### Individual Comments of Interest:

- From Finance Members: I am committed to keeping the programs for the early childhood system, especially the 4YO Pre-K program.
- I support programs like the one at Capitol High School that offers day care at school to keep the young mothers in school and close to their babies. Can we prove the success of the graduation rate of these mothers?
- Early childhood education is “pretty important”.
- The "Feed to Achieve" program is not such an important priority to me as the in-home programs are to help families.
- Concerns about “really poor kids whose families do not know how to help them get prepared and stay prepared for school”.

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- Only one mentioned the potential loss of Head Start classrooms, teachers and slots as a result of the sequestration.
- Two legislators expressed disappointment that WV did not apply for the federal grant “Race to the Top”
- Need to look at other funding sources for early childhood education including federal and private
- Make sure parents know about the 0-8 YO brain development opportunity when leaving the hospital with the baby
- Concerns about quality child care programs availability across the state.
- One legislator said he hoped the recommendations would be how to get the best early childhood education system and not the best system that WV can pay for.
- One recommended combining the early childhood responsibilities into one state agency...that responsibilities split between DHHR and Education to implement the quality rating system sets up conflicts that are not necessary.

#### Specific Recommendations from conversations:

- We need to do a better job of enrolling and screening all children before school. There needs to be a coordinated effort in each county for the pre-school preparation for the families and kids. Move from the individual school conducting this process to a more regional process to allow for better promotion. Want to make sure kids have all immunizations and proper paperwork before school begins each year.
- Offer to have Family Resource Networks present at December meeting of the Joint Committee on Children and Families.
- Must engage families.
- Specific policy suggestions on what legislators can do is necessary instead of saying improve this or that. This was a specific request from one legislator.

#### \*Suggested steps to eliminate poverty:

- Examine what resources a typical community needs (define by municipality or county but settle on one). I.e. how much day care, after school programming, Pre-K programs are needed.
- Figure out the costs to get good results.
- How do we help Mom and Dad be good parents?
- Determine the amount of money and the systems that use it best and then focus on getting those funds to those programs and evaluate the results.

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Every legislator I spoke with is interested in receiving and reading the report. They agreed they need more and deeper understanding of the system. Additional follow-up meetings need to be held with Delegate David Perry (D, Fayette), Vice-Chair of Education and Senator John Unger (D, Berkeley), Majority Leader and Chair of the Select Committee on Children and Poverty.

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