

**Public Comments for the Listening and Learning about Early Learning
Tour
U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and
Human Services**

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Family Engagement

Thank you for taking the time to be here today and hear our thoughts and comments on the importance of family engagement in early learning. While I recognize that each of you is more eminently qualified to speak on this important topic, I appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts. My name is Phyllis Kalifeh and I am the President and CEO of the Children's Forum located in Tallahassee, FL.

The Children's Forum is a nonprofit organization operating in the State of Florida and beyond whose mission is to provide leadership, advocacy and professional development opportunities to achieve high quality, affordable early care and education for all children. Fundamental to achieving our mission is the availability of qualified early learning professionals who possess the knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs to effectively engage parents as partners, particularly in child caregiving environments outside the home to infuse a culture of family engagement.

There are many issues plaguing the field of early childhood but none are as important in my mind as the role of the teacher or caregiver who interacts with young children and their families on a daily basis. In Florida, more than 600,000 children attend some form of child care, prekindergarten or early learning program daily.¹ They are cared for and taught by teachers who likely have only a high school diploma or less (51%). Teachers with some college represent approximately 27%, 9% actually possess an associate degree and 13% possess a bachelors degree or higher.² In addition to the educational challenges of the early learning workforce, approximately

¹ Children's Forum, Inc. (2008), Estimates on children in child care in Florida. Tallahassee, FL.

² Herzenberger, S., Price, M. & Bradley, D. (2005) Losing ground in early childhood education: Declining workforce qualifications in an expanding industry. Research report by the Keystone Research Center, Harrisburg, PA.

3.5 out of 10 will leave their jobs within the first year of employment.³ Turnover is high and exceeds that of those working in the public education sector considerably. These facts are important as we know that young children from birth to five are the most vulnerable and are building the critical foundations necessary for success in school and life.

Continuity of care and stable relationships with adults are critical for both families and their children. Imagine for a moment that you're the parent of a new baby and you have six weeks of leave before you must return to your job. If you choose a child care center, you will likely have a different teacher in the morning when you drop off your baby than you do when you pick him up in the afternoon. Then there's 30 – 40% chance that the teachers you have met and formed relationships with will be gone before the end of the baby's first year and thereafter. Then as your baby becomes a toddler, he will likely change classes and have new teachers, different in the morning and afternoon. By the time a child reaches kindergarten age, parents and their young children will probably have had 10-15 different adults if the workforce is relatively stable. Trust and relationship building are critical for both the children and their parents during the early learning years. The early childhood teacher or caregiver is the lynchpin to establishing healthy relationships for successful family partnerships on behalf of the child. If these are the facts, what can we then do about them?

In the spirit of full disclosure, the Children's Forum is also the administrative home for the Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) Early Childhood® Scholarship program, a role we have maintained for the past 14 years. The mission of T.E.A.C.H. is to provide opportunities for those who work in child care and preschool programs, whether school-based, center-based or family child care homes to increase their knowledge and skills in working with young children including training in family engagement through informal and formal educational pathways. More than a scholarship, the creator of the program, Sue Russell, keenly understood the nuances of the early learning workforce. The program incorporates a three-way partnership between the sponsor (typically the owner or director of the program), the teacher and the T.E.A.C.H. program addressing the issues of education, compensation and retention – issues that have challenged the early learning field.

The sponsoring center agrees to provide paid release time for the teacher for three hours each week so that he/she can study and manage multiple roles. The sponsor further agrees to assume a portion of the costs for their teacher(s) and to provide a raise or bonus upon completion of their contract. The teacher agrees to pay their portion of books and tuition and attend classes to work towards credentials and degrees in early childhood or child development and agrees to remain employed at the sponsoring center for one year beyond the completion of the contract. Finally, the T.E.A.C.H. program pays a majority of the tuition and books and provides a bonus upon completion to recognize and reward their achievement.

³ Whitebook, M., & Sakai, L. (2003). Turnover begets turnover: An examination of job and occupational instability among child car center staff. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 18, 273-293.

The T.E.A.C.H. program operates in more than 20 states nationwide. The data clearly confirm the progress of the field for those who have been fortunate to participate. Last year, national T.E.A.C.H. data show that 78% of the states reported increases in compensation of 5% or more and all states reported compensation increases— an important fact considering the economic climate in our country. More than 21,000 scholarships were awarded and 125,820 credit hours were completed. The program has been successful in retaining those participating in the program with 61% of the states reporting turnover of 5% or less (as compared with 35% - 40% nationally) and all remaining states reported 11% or less. The program is addressing that critical need for stability and continuity of care for young children and their families.⁴

Diversity in the child's caregiving environment is also an important consideration. The early childhood workforce should be culturally and linguistically competent and represent the audiences it serves. The T.E.A.C.H. program also recognizes the need for a diverse workforce and states are challenged to develop plans to recruit underserved populations. 42% of the recipients last year were people of color and 10% were Latina. Family engagement strategies must be respectful of the culture and diversity of families it serves.

The T.E.A.C.H. program is evidence based and has a history of successful outcomes for those who work in early childhood. This year we celebrate 20 years since the creation of T.E.A.C.H. While states are successful once they have the resources and are able to fully implement the program, a national strategy and focus on the professional development of the workforce is critical to achieve our early learning goals. Children deserve a competent, fairly compensated, and stable early childhood workforce and families deserve the opportunity to be partners with committed professionals working in tandem to achieve the best outcomes for their children.

If we truly believe in family engagement, we must support the early childhood workforce. I urge you to ensure that America's agenda for young children and early learning recognize the importance and focus on the professional development of the early childhood workforce and expansion of proven models such as T.E.A.C.H. that can produce the results we want and need for our children and their families. We know what works but we need the political will to achieve the best results for our nation's children.

I sincerely thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

⁴ T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood & Child Care WAGE\$ National Annual Program Report (2008 - 2009): Creating Systems of Support for the Early Childhood Workforce, Child Care Services Association, Chapel Hill, N.C.