

Early Childhood and School Readiness Commission

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Executive Summary

Commission Charge

Pursuant to section 26-6.5-203, C.R.S., the Early Childhood and School Readiness Commission is charged with policy improvement related to early childhood and school readiness, including the areas of health, mental health, parental involvement, family support, child care, and early learning. The commission must meet at least six times annually through 2012.

Commission Activities

The Early Childhood and School Readiness Commission met five times during the 2009 interim and are meeting for the sixth and final time on November 9th, 2009. Each meeting focused on a variety of topics in early childhood care and education. The commission heard from many stakeholders, state officials, agencies and departments, and experts in the field of child development, child care, and early education. These presenters were typically heard as part of panels testifying on related topics (e.g. the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program-CCCAP). An opportunity for public testimony was provided at each meeting.

Early childhood program quality, the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program-CCCAP. The commission received testimony from the Division of Child Care, early care providers, county representatives, local Early Childhood Council representatives and other entities charged with implementation and use of the CCCAP program. The commission received an update on the CCCAP program from the Division of Child Care, Colorado Department of Human Services. Specifically, several representatives from the Division of Child Care testified as to the program function, rules, and implementation. The commission was also briefed by a county commissioner from El Paso County on the implementation of the CCCAP program at the local level. Representatives from the state wide Early Childhood Councils also testified on their interactions with the CCCAP program at a regional level (e.g. the San Luis Valley and other Colorado regions). Finally, the commission was briefed by a variety of early care and education providers on CCCAP program function and challenges at the service delivery/care facility level. In response to these discussions, the commission recommended Bill 4, which changes the CCCAP eligibility redetermination period, aligns eligibility redetermination with Head Start for dually enrolled children, eliminates in-eligibility period income or activity change reporting, and specifies what activities cannot be deemed non-eligible for receipt of child care subsidy funds (e.g. maternity leave, school attendance).

The commission was also briefed by entities charged with quality improvement in early care and education. They include Qualistar Early Learning, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the Early Childhood Education Association of Colorado, and the National Association of Family Child Care. These entities are all charged with quality rating or accreditation of all types of early care and education settings including family care homes and care centers. In response to these discussions the commission recommended Bill 3, which empowers the Division of Child Care develop criteria for a

tiered child care reimbursement system based on quality and quality improvement. This legislation would allocate greater CCCAP funds to family care homes and centers that invest in quality improvement initiatives such as, but not limited to quality ratings or accreditations, teacher qualifications, low child-teacher ratios and parental involvement programs. Bill 3 empowers the Division of Child Care to grant funds to local county/Early Childhood Council partnerships that develop plans for tiered child care quality reimbursement based on local program resources and needs. Due to variability in early care and education options and needs around the state, the commission recommended that Bill 3 be a grant program that incentivizes local county/Early Childhood Council collaboration to coordinate and create tiered quality systems for a given county (or counties). Funds for this program would come from the federal Early Learning Challenge Fund, a part of the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2009 (H.R. 3221). Bill 3 is contingent on receipt of these funds. The commission has been in close contact with the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, which is expected to submit the application in early 2010. Bills 3 and 4 and all other proposed legislation by the commission strengthen Colorado's chances of receiving these federal funds. Currently H.R. 3221 has passed out of the U.S. House of Representatives with bipartisan support.

Early childhood program quality, professional development of early care and education teachers. The commission was briefed by the Colorado Department of Higher Education-CDHE, Colorado Department of Education-CDE, and the Colorado Office of Professional Development-OPD on issues relating to degree granting, certifications and teacher preparedness for early childhood professionals in the state. Specifically, CDHE and CDE testified on the existing early childhood degrees and certifications in Colorado, and existing articulation agreements between two and four year institutions specific to early childhood. The Office of Professional Development briefed the commission on the prevalence of these certifications and degrees, as well as the effectiveness of existing articulation agreements. The commission also received testimony from the Colorado Head Start Association and from the Colorado Preschool Program-CPP in CDE on teacher qualifications and the relationship between teacher quality in Head Start and CPP, and academic outcomes for program participants. The Colorado Head Start Association also testified to changes in allowable teacher qualifications that will go into effect in 2013. From these discussions, the commission recommended Bill 1 which creates a scholarship fund for early education professionals to pursue their Associate of Arts/Science-AA or AS degree in early childhood. This scholarship requires the student to be teaching in an early care and education facility while attending school, and requires a two year post degree commitment. This legislation is contingent on receipt of federal funds from the Early Learning Challenge Grants discussed previously in this document.

Early childhood program quality, continuity between pre-k and kindergarten. The commission was updated by the Director of the Colorado Preschool Program at CDE on several occasions. The commission was briefed on the longitudinal outcome data for several cohorts of children participating in CPP. The commissioners raised concern about the continuity of services between CPP and existing kindergarten programs. Representatives from CDE discussed the changes made to statute in 2009 that effectively eliminated the alignment between CPP and full day kindergarten. Specifically, under 2008 C.R.S., 22-28-108 the maximum number of students in a kindergarten class could not exceed twenty,

classrooms had to maintain a one-to-ten child-to-adult ratio, children who received support from CPP funded kindergarten were identified as at-risk for school failure, kindergarten classrooms had to adhere to CPP quality standards and best practice, and school districts had to report annually on outcomes for children and families participating in full day kindergarten. In 2009, kindergarten was removed from the purview of CPP and these regulations no longer existed. Discussions with the Department of Education on this matter prompted the commission to propose Bill 2 which would improve continuity between existing pre-k programs and kindergarten programs by re-establishing some of the quality initiatives discussed above. Again, this legislation is dependent on receipt of federal funds and is conceptually linked to the Low Performing Schools assurance area of the Race to the Top program. The commission sought information and recommendations from the Department of Education and the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, and Bill 2 was proposed as a way to ensure quality services in kindergarten and simultaneously improve the strength of the Race to the Top application.

Early childhood program efficiency, universal application. Over the course of the 2009 interim, the commission was updated by several state agencies charged with providing early care and education services, health services, and other support services to at-risk families with young children. The Departments of Education, Human Services, and Public Health and Environment all serve young children and their families in a variety of programs. From the testimony of these agencies, and child care providers charged with helping families negotiate the many applications for services, the commission noted that there is unnecessary redundancy and complexity in the application process for programs. To that end, the commission proposed Bill 5 which establishes a work group of representatives from these (and other) state agencies to work with the Office of Information and Technology on developing a universal application for services. This application system ostensibly would act as a portal application that would populate other existing state agency applications. The commission was briefed by the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, which has staff currently working on modeling this type of universal application.

Commission Recommendations

As a result of the commission's discussion and deliberation, they recommended five bills for consideration in the 2010 legislative session.

Bill 1- Creation of the Early Childhood Teacher Scholarship Program. Subject to the receipt and allocation of sufficient federal funds, Bill 1 would create in the Department of Education and early childhood educator scholarship program to award stipends to persons pursuing an associate's degree in early childhood education. The Department of Education will administer the program, develop rules and criteria for application and dispense awards to qualifying students. The Department of Education will also assign each scholarship recipient a unique educator identifier to track the development of the teacher, and the student outcomes associated with that teacher. When funds are no longer sufficient, the provisions of this bill will be repealed.

Bill 2- Concerning the Continuity of Services in Kindergarten. Subject to the receipt and allocation of sufficient federal funds, Bill 2 authorizes the Department of Education to distribute funds to public school districts so they can provide continuity of high quality services to children in kindergarten after they transition out of another high quality early education program such as the Colorado Preschool Program or Head Start. School districts are to use the funds for kindergarten services and to follow program standards and practice established by the Colorado Preschool Program and/or other evidence based practices in early childhood. These include but are not limited to smaller class size, fewer children per teacher, parental engagement programs, and professional development of classroom staff. The Department may also provide any technical assistance for implementing program standards or evidence based practice in kindergarten classrooms. Funds will be distributed to school districts using the same procedure that as the Colorado Preschool Program, and when funds are no longer sufficient, the provisions of this bill will be repealed.

Bill 3- Creates a Colorado Quality in Child Care Incentive Program (Tiered Reimbursement Program). Subject to the receipt of sufficient federal funds, or gifts, grants and donations, Bill 3 creates a quality in child care incentive grant program with the goal of providing incentives to county or district departments of social services to improve the quality of early care and education. Individual counties have flexibility in the implementation of a tiered reimbursement system, but they must partner with a local Early Childhood Council to develop the program. Criteria for the selection of council/county partnerships that will receive grant funds include but are not limited to blending CCCAP slots with other high quality programs such as Head Start and CPP, employing teachers with an associate's or bachelor's degree in early childhood, participating in a quality rating or accreditation rating system, and investing in the professional development of teachers. The state board of human services will be given rule making authority to establish and implement the quality grant program. When funds for the program are no longer sufficient, the provisions of this bill will be repealed.

Bill 4- Concerning Eligibility Determinations for the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program. During the 2009 interim, testimony from a variety of agencies and stakeholders revealed that the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program has several programmatic barriers and statutory restricts that contribute to instability in receipt of CCCAP subsidy and discontinuity of care for young children. The commission was briefed by numerous care providers, the Division of Child Care, and the National Conference of State Legislatures on how to improve stability and continuity of child care subsidy services. The commission also examined the 2008 Report of the State Auditor or Colorado on the CCCAP program. Recommendations from these stakeholders mirrored those of the State Auditors report. Bill 4 aligns CCCAP eligibility redetermination with the eligibility redetermination of the Head Start program for children who are dually enrolled in those programs. For children solely receiving CCCAP subsidy, the eligibility period will be extended from six to 12 months. For all children receiving CCCAP subsidy, parents will not have to report changes in activity or income during an eligibility period. In addition, no person may be denied receipt of CCCAP subsidy for attending school (high-school, vocational, or higher education), during the summer months between school years, for maternity leave, and for being a separated spouse or parent under a validly issued temporary order for parental responsibilities where the other spouse or parent has disqualifying financial resources. Finally, family eligibility

redetermination will not be retrospective; rather it will evaluate family eligibility at the point of redetermination only.

Bill 5- Establishes a Universal Application Subcommittee to the Government Data Advisory Board.

Subject to the receipt of sufficient federal funds, or gifts, grants and donations, Bill 5 establishes an early childhood universal application subcommittee to the government data advisory board in the Office of Information and Technology. The subcommittee will be charged with preparing a report on a universal application to be used by all state agencies, school districts, and federally funded early childhood programs. The recommendations for a universal application will include but are not limited to programs such as Medicaid; the Children's Basic Health Plan; Head Start; the Colorado Preschool Program; the free and reduced cost lunch program; the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program; the Child and Adult Care Food Program; the Colorado Works Program; the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children; the food stamp program; and the Early Childhood Council Programs. The members of the subcommittee include representative from school districts, the Colorado Department of Education, the Colorado Department of Human Services, the Colorado Department of Health Care Policy and Financing, the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, the Chief Information Officer of the Colorado Office of Information and Technology, a private provider under the CCCAP program, a private Early Head Start or Head Start agency representative, a care provider that is a certified assistance site for Medicaid and the Children's Basic Health Plan, and other early care and education experts as appointed by the Governor. The subcommittee will meet as necessary at the call of the chair to complete its duties and will hold the first meeting no later than August 1, 2010.