



MISSISSIPPI BLUEPRINT FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Adopted by SECAC in November 2015

Office of the Governor, Laurie Smith, Ph.D.
Policy Advisor/Executive Director, SECAC
601-576-2010, laurie.smith@governor.ms.gov



The Time for Coordination

The time is now. Mississippi's children cannot wait any longer to receive the education they need and deserve, and Mississippi residents are ready to benefit from the research-proven positive effects of a high quality state system of early childhood education. High quality early childhood education has both educational and economic value. Recipients are less likely to repeat any K-12 grade, are almost three times more likely to go to a four-year college, and are significantly less likely to be unemployed adults later in life. For over ten years, Mississippi has been laying the groundwork to build the necessary infrastructure for providing high-quality early childhood education across the state through foundational investments, business involvement, state agency initiatives and efforts, and community engagement. However, despite such diligent effort, Mississippi's early education system is fragmented and uncoordinated, and continues to operate in separate agency silos. The impact of this lack of coordination shows in 2014 data on kindergarten readiness—right now, only 35% of Mississippi's children demonstrate readiness to learn in kindergarten. These data make it clear that without specific governance and coordination across early childhood, efforts within the early childhood system will remain pocketed and fragmented, leading to inefficiency, unrealized potential, and a lack of success.

Right now, only 35% of Mississippi children are ready to learn in kindergarten.

As members of the State Early Childhood Advisory Council (SECAC), we strongly believe that it is of the utmost importance that all of Mississippi's children demonstrate readiness to learn by kindergarten and continued success through 3rd grade and beyond. We believe that working on a systems level approach to improve the

Recipients of early childhood education are:

- ✓ less likely to repeat any K-12 grade
- ✓ are almost three times more likely to go to a four-year college
- ✓ are significantly less likely to be unemployed adults later in life.

coordination and quality of early childhood education is the best place to begin. From there, we can consider how to create alignment across the early childhood and K-3 systems, broaden early childhood opportunities across the state, and expand coordination with the other systems that support early childhood, such as health and family support services.

The SECAC has created this Mississippi Blueprint for Early Childhood Education to clearly articulate its agreed upon goals and objectives for cross-system coordination, designed to ensure that all of Mississippi's children demonstrate readiness to learn by kindergarten. For the purposes of this Blueprint, readiness to learn is defined using criteria present in Mississippi's Kindergarten Literacy Readiness

Indicators, including the ability to distinguish letters from numbers, identify and name letters of the alphabet, write one's own name and recognize letters 0-20. These Indicators, with others, make up a trusted, valid, and reliable tool that is already being used by educators in the state to gather and report objective data related to literacy development and language, to inform the development of instructional opportunities and to minimize achievement disparities.

What is the Return on Investment for Mississippi?

Improvements to early childhood education on a statewide level will have positive implications beyond improving school readiness and closing the achievement gap. Recent research has demonstrated that investments in early education also have a significant impact on the state's economy and can be considered an effective economic development strategy. For example, one study found that early education investments yield a return that far exceeds the return on most public projects that are considered economic development. When looking at model programs, the study found a return on investment of 16% with 80% of those benefits going to the general public.¹ Another study, which looked beyond financial return on investment, to describe how individual productivity can be fostered by investments in young children, particularly children in poverty or other adverse circumstances. The researchers argued that cognitive and noncognitive abilities are important for a productive workforce, and the gaps that emerge early are difficult to change and because skills are accumulated, starting early and over time, investing in young children is a strong investment in future productivity and public safety.² Similarly, a longitudinal study demonstrated continued positive long-term effects of high-quality early childhood care and education on low-income 3- and 4-year-olds in several domains from economic/workforce, to education, to crime prevention. Overall, the study documented a return to society of more than \$17 for every dollar invested in the early care and education program, primarily because of the large continuing effect on the reduction of male crime.³

¹ Rolnick, A. and R. Grunewald, *Early Childhood Development with a High Public Return*. March 2003. Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank.

² Heckman, J.J. and D.V. Masterov, *The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children*. October 2004.

³ High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, *The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40*. November 2004.

Research has shown that for every dollar invested in the early care and education program, **the return to society can be as much as \$17** when factoring in outcomes such as increased productivity and reduced crime and reliance on public assistance.

However, improving services on a statewide level is no easy task, and like all states, Mississippi faces its own set of very unique challenges when it comes to improving early childhood education. Some of the challenges experienced during previous early learning reforms in Mississippi have included a lack of any state funding for preschool; a Quality Rating System in need of reform; and the fact that almost 10 percent of early childhood educators did not possess a high school diploma or General Education Development credential (GED). The greatest hindrance to statewide early education reform in Mississippi has been the inability, across sectors and stakeholder groups, to agree on the same vision for early childhood, and to cooperate to tackle existing issues together. The SECAC hopes this challenge can be overcome through the development and utilization of an agreed upon and thoroughly understood plan based on the six SECAC goals.

How Do We Propose to Make this Vision Our Reality?

Coordinating past, present, and future efforts to improve early childhood education in Mississippi to ensure all children are ready to learn requires the development of a carefully constructed plan that brings together all statewide efforts related to early childhood, and identifies all desired outcomes and the activities deemed necessary to achieve them. To meet the challenges at hand, SECAC intends to build upon Mississippi's successes and strengths with bold reform (goals that are ambitious yet attainable and sustainable), placing special attention on six carefully

chosen key areas and grounding our strategies in proven and promising practices. The six key areas for reform designated by SECAC are described below as goals followed by several specific objectives to allow for easily measured progress on the most efficient path toward readiness to learn and 3rd grade literacy.

Goal 1: Implement high quality standards for early education across the state

One of the premises of access to high-quality early childhood education programs is that all children should have equal opportunity. To allow all of Mississippi's children to have equal access to high-quality programs, the state must continue to increase the expectations placed on our early childhood educators to understand and use early learning standards to engage with and teach all children. Mississippi must ensure that the state's early learning standards set high expectations, and that these standards are researched-based, carefully considered, measurable, and agreed upon by the agencies, organizations, and individuals involved in their use. Follow through is also of utmost importance. Though recent progress has been made with the adoption of the new Early Learning Standards, it is critical that Mississippi continues to focus on the implementation of these standards. Expanding training and technical assistance and progress monitoring to ensure the use of the standards in classrooms are key to reaching this goal. Throughout the process, all parties involved in early childhood education must remain devoted to ensuring that these standards are upheld.

To obtain this goal, SECAC has proposed the following objectives:

1. *Establish a plan to ensure ongoing awareness and use of Mississippi Early Learning Standards and Guidelines for parents and providers.*
2. *Increase the competency of providers regarding use of the Mississippi Early Learning Standards and Guidelines.*
3. *Establish a system of communication between child care or preschool and kindergarten including the use*

of "report cards," or "standardized progress reports," to note each student's level of mastery and progress achieved prior to moving to the kindergarten level.

4. *Develop metrics with actionable measures for assessing progress toward achieving the state standards.*



Goal 2: Revise and expand use of state's QRS system to provide centers the assistance they need to promote quality improvements statewide and improve access to quality early childhood programs

The purpose of a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) is to encourage child care centers to go above and beyond minimum licensing requirements to provide a high-quality early learning experience. This is something that Mississippi residents want for all children. However, Mississippi's current Quality Rating System (QRS) standards are not aligned with early learning program standards, which leads to confusion, a lack of cohesion, and ineffectiveness. In addition, though participation in the QRS program is free, it is also voluntary and, currently, statewide participation is only 38% of eligible centers. Participation rates are on the rise, however, the majority of centers enrolled in the system are not able to meet requirements for the 2-star rating (on a 5-star scale) within the QRS. Clearly, the current QRS system and methods of implementation are not working to improve the quality of child care, and it is time to revise Mississippi's QRS system and provide centers with the assistance they need to promote quality improvements.

To address the issues with the current QRS, Mississippi will revise the existing system using feedback from early childhood educators and child care providers throughout the state, as well as national information and expertise. The new system will raise the quality and rigor of the standards and ensure alignment with other components of the state early learning strategy. In addition to QRS standards revision, the new system will provide significantly more professional development and technical assistance support to child

care center directors and early childhood educators to ensure that they understand the QRS standards and are able to effectively and efficiently improve early childhood education. Furthermore, to promote the understanding and effectiveness of the system, there will be enhanced efforts to inform families about the meaning of the ratings and ways in which centers can move to higher tiers (in other words, earn more stars). This latter effort aims to empower the community to encourage centers to participate in improvement efforts. In addition, Mississippi will aim to encourage statewide participation in the QRS beyond the state's publicly funded-centers to include Head Start centers, privately-funded centers, and church-based centers.

To achieve this goal, SECAC has proposed the following specific objectives:

1. *Improve understanding of provider needs on current QRS Implementation.*
2. *Improve provider input, participation, and use of the QRS.*



Goal 3: Train and prepare a capable and ready early education workforce

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Mississippi has one of the most innovative workforce systems in the country. With such creativity, talent and drive, Mississippi is well-positioned to develop and provide the caliber of professional development that the early childhood workforce needs if it is to meet the ambitious goal of creating an environment where all children are ready to learn by kindergarten and are proficient readers by 3rd grade. However, recent research shows that almost ten percent of Mississippi's early learning educators lack a high school diploma or GED. These under-qualified educators were shown to be more highly concentrated in areas with greater proportions of high-needs children. Though specific portions of the state have demonstrated innovation with workforce training in the past, it is time for Mississippi to work toward statewide success in the early childhood sector. Time is of the essence and the need for well-developed and implemented training for Mississippi's early education workforce is dire.

Mississippi is aware that simply requiring higher levels of education will not remedy the state's early childhood educator deficiency overnight, nor will it address the deficiency that exists among those early childhood educators lacking sufficient education and training. It also will not improve the skills and competence of the other 91 percent of early childhood educators in the state. There are already many efforts in place to support the training, professional development and credentialing of MS's child care providers. Still, Mississippi must take into account the fact that in some of the more rural, sparsely populated areas of the state there are few qualified applicants for positions related to early learning and development, and for those applicants who may be interested but less qualified, financial barriers make it difficult to obtain further education that might increase their qualifications. With all of these factors in mind, SECAC has recognized the need to provide all early childhood educators with resources and opportunities to help them boost their skills and expand their knowledge. Mississippi must continue to develop professional development opportunities, expand credentialing and preserve training offered through community colleges to create opportunities for early childhood professionals to enhance their skills and qualifications. The coordination of professional development activities to ensure consistent quality across programs throughout the state is absolutely critical to ensuring a highly qualified workforce in all areas of Mississippi. Regardless of the environment in which they work or the specific role they play, all of those who work closely with Mississippi's youngest residents should be supported in their role through plentiful and readily available training, technical assistance and professional development. And Mississippi's children and families should be guaranteed quality early childhood educators and caregivers regardless of socioeconomic status or locality.

To achieve this goal, SECAC has proposed the following specific objectives:

1. *Support a coordinated professional development system for early childhood providers.*
2. *Recommend articulation agreements between 2- and 4-year institutions for early childhood programs.*



Goal 4: Roll out a Statewide Kindergarten Readiness Assessment

Many children entering kindergarten in Mississippi, especially children with high needs, come to school unprepared for the challenges of school. Many are already behind in basic academic skills, social-emotional development, and physical development. While various kindergarten entry assessments are used across the state, the variation among them has posed many issues in the comparability and reliability of results. These assessments are not adequate to support efforts to assess and continuously improve Mississippi's revised early standards (Goal 1) and the validity of the revised QRS (Goal 2). They are also inadequate to support other aspects of early childhood programs including educator pre-service training, certification programs, and continuing professional development. Recently, all of these factors led to the realization that state legislation mandating a universal kindergarten entry assessment is necessary. This realization became action with the passage of Education Works legislation in July 2013, which included the requirement that all districts to use a universal kindergarten entry assessment and the release of an RFP to identify an appropriate assessment tool.

The assessment chosen, the STAR Early Literacy Exam, evaluates skills such as the ability to recognize letters and match letters to their sounds and a student's recognition that print flows from left to right, and produces reports for parents and teachers that detail each child's early reading skills. Teacher reports also include diagnostic information and instructional plans for every student. Research from a four-year study of the assessment show that 84% of students at the beginning of kindergarten with a score of 530 or above on the STAR Early Literacy exam are on track to become proficient readers by the end of third grade. Mississippi intends to mandate statewide use of the assessment by 2019.

SECAC is in full agreement with the rationale behind Education Works, and believes that in order to realize success, Mississippi must improve professional knowledge regarding the implications of the data from

the kindergarten readiness assessment for long term child outcomes among early elementary teachers, early learning programs, parents, and policy-makers. The first step toward this goal is the implementation of an effective kindergarten readiness assessment with mandatory statewide usage. The resulting data will provide much needed information to the leadership of early childhood programs and services in Mississippi to promote improvement activities that will support children's development of skills needed to be ready for kindergarten.

To obtain this goal, SECAC has proposed the following specific objectives:

1. *Implement an effective kindergarten readiness assessment statewide.*



Goal 5: Foster and support sustained partnerships and engagement with families and communities

Mississippi's parental involvement has always been strong, especially in the state's rural communities where many citizens collaborate in efforts to establish and improve early learning centers and increase children's school readiness. Despite this history of parental interest and engagement, the State has often fallen short when it comes to providing parents with adequate information regarding their children's early learning experience, such as details regarding curriculum and standards for early learning professionals. While there are pockets of innovation and success in parent engagement, such as parental workshops sponsored by all our Head Start centers and the establishment of Family Resource centers in several communities, these efforts do not keep up with the demand for information or create consistent opportunities for engagement by parents across all of Mississippi's early learning centers.

Mississippi is aware that any improvements to the early learning centers, QRS system, or the early childhood educator workforce will not be sustained if the home setting has not also received the same level attention in the form of support, assistance and "professional

development” for parents. It is also critical that efforts to engage and support families be well coordinated at the community and state level, so that it is clear what supports are available and supports are easily accessed. Therefore, the fifth goal proposed by the SECAC committee involves increasing coordinated partnership and engagement strategies for all involved in the early childhood community by integrating family and community engagement and parenting support.

To achieve this goal, SECAC has proposed the following objectives:

1. *Create an Early Learning and Care knowledge public portal to promote available resources and improve engagement, access and awareness in order to improve child and family outcomes.*
2. *Develop ongoing engagement efforts to promote awareness of and connection to resources for all families and community partners. Engagement effort should focus on the wide variety of individuals and groups involved from providers to policy-makers to parents and families (especially teen parents, parents of children with high needs, English language learners, and homeless families).*



Goal 6: Implement a statewide early childhood data system

Though Mississippi’s early childhood providers have collected various data related to early learning and care for Mississippi’s youngest residents for some time now, the data collected has not been standardized, nor has there been one designated place for storage or analysis. Without a mechanism to aggregate and analyze all of the data collected, the state is unable to use this information to evaluate the success of specific interventions and programs, determine which produce positive outcomes for children, or whether interventions and programs are effective for only some of Mississippi’s children. Data collection, analysis

and use will be critical in the effort to coordinate Mississippi’s early childhood system and to effectively make decisions to promote growth and quality across the system.

Therefore, the sixth goal of SECAC is to build a robust early childhood data system that will coordinate the data collection to help inform decisions and support continuous improvement of Mississippi’s early childhood system. This data system will be integrated across programs and agencies to allow for in depth analysis of the effectiveness of programs and services. It will also create the ability to track and support individual children’s educational progress from early education through elementary school and beyond. It will contain accurate, up to date information to inform program improvement decisions, state and local policy initiatives, and general research on early childhood in Mississippi. Furthermore, the system will facilitate cross-system service integration and coordination to help ensure young children and their families have access to the full range of services specific to their individual needs, and that those services are well coordinated. Policymakers, teachers and program administrators, researchers, and the general public will benefit from having access to system wide data for state-specific data-driven solutions and conclusions.

To reach this goal, SECAC has proposed the following objectives:

1. *Establish and implement a Mississippi Early Childhood Data System (ECDS) Governing Council (data governance structure) to improve the use of data across the early childhood system.*
2. *Establish an integrated, coordinated early childhood data system that clearly illustrates what the early childhood system in Mississippi looks like from an operational, programmatic, and policy perspective.*
3. *Establish a clear link for a Mississippi early childhood integrated data system to the State Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) to analyze long-term outcomes for children.*

Conclusion

It is clear that Mississippi has come a long way in the last ten years toward improving the quality and organization of the services provided to the state's youngest residents, their families, and the professionals that educate and care for them. What Mississippi needs now is a clear step by step plan, commonly agreed upon goals, and governance paired with stable infrastructure to organize those services already in place and to provide the support necessary structures to ensure that progress continues. The SECAC's six goal areas begin the important work to coordinate efforts across early childhood education, and will provide the much needed foundation for future work. However, if Mississippi is going to continue to move forward, efforts to coordinate the state's early childhood education system must continue and increase in scope to provide a high quality and comprehensive set of services and supports to all children. Mississippi needs a strong early childhood governance structure that is able to make decisions, strategically plan and implement policies for the state early childhood system, and spearhead the coordination of efforts across the system. A strong governance structure will also support the future alignment across the early childhood and K-3 systems, and the eventual expansion of coordination with the other systems that support early childhood, such as health and family support services.

Mississippi is poised and ready to lead the charge to ensure that all of the state's children are ready to learn by the time they enter kindergarten and are proficient readers by 3rd grade. These factors have been proven through research to spur a waterfall of positive changes, including higher graduation rates, a reduction in crime, and the creation of a more stable and successful workforce. By improving the quality, coordination and governance of early childhood education, Mississippi will take a huge step toward a happier, healthier, and more financially secure future for all residents.