

*Massachusetts Department of Early
Education and Care*

*Annual Legislative Report
FY2011*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	Page 3
Introduction	Page 8
2011 Context	Page 11
Board	Page 11
Budget	Page 13
Organizational Framework	Page 17
Strategic Direction: Quality	Page 18
Strategic Direction: Family Support, Access and Affordability	Page 39
Strategic Direction: Workforce	Page 55
Strategic Direction: Communications	Page 64
Strategic Direction: Infrastructure	Page 71
Appendices	Page 77
Appendix A: Legislative Reporting Requirements	
Appendix B: Board Members	
Appendix C: Summary of ARRA Projects	
Appendix D: EEC Budget: FY2011 Appropriation (Including PAC)	
Appendix E: ARRA Funding and Expenditures	
Appendix F: Licensing Activity May 2009 – October 2010	
Appendix G: Mental Health Consultation Services Grant Information	
Appendix H: Languages Spoken of Children Receiving EEC Financial Assistance	
Appendix I: ECE Scholarship Program Demographics	
Appendix J: Professional Development Opportunities on EEC Calendar	
Appendix K: Limited English Proficiency Grant Demographics	
Appendix L: Educator and Provider Support Data	
Appendix M: Board Votes	
Appendix N: Professional Development Registry Demographics	
Appendix O: Quality Project Details	
Appendix P: Family Support, Access, and Affordability Project Details	
Appendix Q: Workforce Project Details	
Appendix R: Communications Project Details	
Appendix S: Infrastructure Project Details	

Executive Summary

As we enter the second decade of the 21st century, the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care recognizes the vital importance of its work to the future social and economic wellbeing of the Commonwealth—as today’s children will become tomorrow’s citizens, workers and parents. If we invest wisely today, utilizing all of what we know from science and best practice, the next generation will pay that back through a lifetime of productivity and responsible citizenship.

In years past, we could only guess at what enabled children to thrive, but recent discoveries in the neurosciences make very clear that a complex array of conditions are necessary for healthy growth and development. We know, for example, that the basic architecture of the maturing brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. Like the construction of a home, the building process begins with laying the foundation, framing the rooms and wiring the electrical system in a predictable sequence. Early experiences literally shape how the brain gets built; a strong foundation in the early years increases the probability of positive outcomes. A weak foundation, on the other hand, increases the odds of later difficulties. It is, therefore, our responsibility as leaders and citizens to get it right for children in the earliest years.

The urgency of this responsibility has motivated the Department to embrace an ambitious agenda this past year on behalf of all families and communities in Massachusetts, despite the ever-present challenge of shrinking resources in the face of growing need.

Toward this end, EEC continues to refine the seamless system that, in 2005, united two disparate state agencies that had been serving the early childhood sector in Massachusetts. As first in the nation to create a single agency to oversee early education and care and after-school services for children, EEC continues its efforts to realize shared purposes, economies and efficiencies of scale. The Department is also stepping up its efforts to be more intentional about its delivery of programs and services, creating core services while allowing local differentiation, and aligning state resources with what we know works for children and their adult caregivers across the settings of home, school and community.

The integration of services on behalf of children was strengthened even further this past year when, for the second time, the Executive Office of Education (EOE) convened a retreat for the Commonwealth’s three Education Commissioners, the UMass President, and their respective Board chairs. The discussion focused on school and college readiness, with specific goals for literacy and other areas of cross-agency focus.

A Tough Economy, A Silver Lining

Like every state agency in this harsh economic climate, EEC saw a severe reduction in its FY2011 budget—more than \$15 million—when compared with the final appropriations of the previous year. Through effective budgeting and close monitoring of caseload, the Department was able to absorb a significant part of this reduction. The pain, however, could not be fully eliminated. Thus, EEC was forced to maintain reduced access to childcare subsidy, to freeze hiring for non health and safety positions, to limit consultants and contractors, and to seek and secure alternative funding streams. EEC sought to ensure statewide access to a system of services for families and providers through Childcare Resource and Referral Centers (CCRR), Mental Health Consultation and Educator and Provider supports (EPS) and Community and Family Engagement (CFEG). To do this within the budget in all instances services were redesigned or focused in each area. As an example, the system of care provided for

mental health shifted from a staff to a consultation model and several CFEG grantees were asked to merge. Despite this development, the Department was able to continue serving all communities. The net result was increased capacity to build relationships between families in the mixed delivery system and educators, as well as an increase in the number of towns served and in the Department's capacity to engage hard to reach families.

Offsetting some of this bad news was the implementation of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), an unprecedented investment in the American economy. Three primary sources of ARRA funding benefitted early education and care: the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), for which Massachusetts received \$23.97 million; Head Start and Early Head Start funding, which provided the state with an additional \$10.1 million; and funding through the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education related to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), to the tune of \$10.2 million.

Since June 2009, the Board has approved thirty-one initiatives funded by ARRA CCDF. This funding has allowed EEC the ability to expand childcare financial assistance by serving additional children and families. Moreover, many of these projects have targeted systematic improvements in early education and care programs, including investments in professional development and quality enhancements. EEC's projects/initiatives have included targeted funds for overall quality along with quality care for infants and toddlers. As of January 31st, EEC has disbursed \$8.76M of the \$23.97 million received in CCDF grants.

Strategic Priorities and Accomplishments

Last summer, the EEC Board gathered at a retreat to set priorities for the upcoming year and discussed prioritizing the Department's Strategic Directions, along with the Board's role and measurements of success, and ways to achieve the legislative goal of universal access to high quality early education and care for 3 & 4 year olds and across the system. At the same time the department sought to increase partnerships in closing the opportunity gap, through literacy focused activities in out of school time programs. They also developed a preliminary agenda for FY11 Board meetings. Out of this discussion came the Board's decision to frame its FY2011 activities around four key goals:

1. State and local leaders understand how EEC initiatives serve and benefit their communities.
2. Align resources to support programs to achieve quality standards defined by QRIS.
3. Early educators should be properly compensated, and adequately trained through further developed professional development standards and opportunities.
4. Continue to develop a delivery system of early education and care services that are known, and accessible to, families.

These goals are in general alignment with the three-year Strategic Plan developed by the Board, which includes five core strategies:

1. Create and implement a system to improve and support quality statewide
2. Create a diverse workforce system that provides supports, expectations and core competencies leading to positive outcomes
3. Build the internal infrastructure to support achieving the vision
4. Increase and promote family support, access and affordability
5. Create and implement a communications strategy to reach all stakeholders

Several ongoing efforts are already moving quickly toward fulfilling some of these goals and strategies. Perhaps the most important of these was the purposeful creation of a statewide network of services for the Department's key stakeholders: children and their families, providers and educators. A related accomplishment this year was a deepening of the partnerships among the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education public colleges and universities, the Department of Public Health and the Department of Housing and Community Development, as well as the continued development of existing partnerships with the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Transitional Assistance. These relationships, far from being symbolic, reflect a more sophisticated understanding of the numerous and interconnected factors that contribute to children's thriving. In this way, child development--when built on a set of quality actions on the part of family and community—becomes a foundation for community and economic development, as capable children become the foundation of a prosperous and sustainable society.

Other FY11 highlights include:

Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)

In the past decade or so, scientists and practitioners have been drawing on lessons learned to define the specific characteristics of a "quality" program, one that is attuned to the developmental needs of all children. They have been able to measure what they call the "effectiveness factors" that often make the difference between programs that work and those that do not work to support children's healthy development. In other words, some children can spend just as many hours in a program, but not show many positive outcomes.

In Massachusetts, we are benefiting from these new understandings to build a system ensuring that all of the community settings for young children in the Commonwealth are of the highest quality. The Commonwealth's new Quality Improvement Rating System (QRIS) is a key tool among many that Massachusetts is developing to help families, communities, and policymakers understand what constitutes quality.

The QRIS also guides professionals in child development settings on a path toward quality, recognizing that higher expectations of programs must be matched with higher supports for those programs, including better articulated career lattices, financial incentives, education and training that is grounded in the science of child development, and extensive technical assistance.

Professional Development

We know from science that the active ingredient that shapes the wiring of the brain is the "serve and return" relationships that children have with adult caregivers in the family and the community. Like the process of serve and return in games such as tennis and volleyball, young children naturally reach out for interaction. Healthy development is facilitated when adults interact in kind. When adults do not interact in kind, development is stunted.

Thus, EEC now expects the Massachusetts early childhood workforce to obtain formal training in early childhood education and content knowledge, along with ongoing professional development that is specifically linked to classroom activities. Previously, much of the emphasis of workforce training centered on competencies related to licensing, including such skills as CPR training and following regulations related to hygiene and attendance. The newer set of skills

and competencies are higher-order in nature—including literacy, positive behavior management, fitness and nutrition, and the sciences. With a focus on the adult learning principles of “theory, practice, and reflection,” formal training ensures that those who work with children come to understand themselves as serious professionals on a path toward proficiency and career growth. To give all early childhood professionals access to professional development, the Department is also offering a range of affordable programs through community-based and regional organizations and with institutions of higher learning. The FY11 statewide implementation of a professional development network is expected to have a demand that exceeds current funding.

Literacy

Science has also brought us new understandings about the interconnectedness of different parts of the brain. In other words, cognitive, emotional and social capacities are tightly connected throughout the life course—and the brain utilizes some functions to enrich others. For example, language acquisition relies on hearing, on the ability to differentiate sounds—and also on the ability to pay attention, regulate emotions and engage in social interaction. This science helps inform a very different understanding of how learning happens—from a model that considers learning a matter of “open head, pour in content” to a much more complex process. The science calls upon those working in schools to be more attentive than is often the case to children’s social and emotional development, and those working in child care centers and after-school programs to be more attentive than is often the case to children’s cognitive development.

For example, in our partnership with Elementary and Secondary Education, we have aligned the curriculum frameworks with the Massachusetts common core standards for English Language Arts. That doesn’t mean that we are drilling children in their ABCs and multiplication tables once they’re out of diapers, but rather that we are identifying what is developmentally appropriate for children to learn that will serve as a scaffold for future learning. Currently, EEC is in the fifth year of implementing the Massachusetts UPK program, providing grant funding directly to pre-school programs meeting specific quality guidelines. This year the department extended the high quality requirements of UPK grantees to other programs and children receiving subsidies. These programs were funded by ARRA and included the KEEP summer initiative.

Mental Health

A greater number of children with mental health issues are being served in childcare than in the past. And while the EEC does not have sufficient funds to create the ideal environment for every child in the Commonwealth directly, we have worked hard to redesign the system so that more than 2000 education and care providers across the state have been trained to help families get the community support they need in partnership with the Department of Health and consultative services are available to all early educators to support classroom management and behavioral interventions.

Community and Family Engagement

Community and family engagement has a long history in the Commonwealth. The Department is working to build a robust and evidence-based engagement strategy, centered around three elements: 1) actively identifying families that are the most socially isolated and hence at greatest risk; 2) ensuring that families, providers and others are informed about comprehensive services and gain skills to support early literacy opportunities in their children within the

community, specifically at 110 community resource centers across the state; 3) making high quality childcare services accessible through the state's Child Care Resource and Referral Centers, and by training staff who work for the state's 211 telephonic system.

Increased Access

We know that chronic poverty and community violence, housing instability, food insecurity, lack of access to health care, mental health services and dental care, and unemployment create situations that are less-than-ideal for children. Scientists call these adverse conditions "toxic stress". When experiences are disruptive, neglectful, abusive or otherwise stressful—they increase the probability of poor outcomes by releasing harmful chemicals in the brain that impair growth and make it harder for the brain to form healthy connections. Particularly in an economy in which there has been high unemployment and in which there is a shortage of quality housing stock, we need to make sure that we are buffering children from these outside forces over which their parents have little control.

Toward that end, the Department is working hard to make services accessible to all children in the Commonwealth. We have spent considerable time studying the waiting list for early education and care settings, and have made significant gains turning over the waitlist. ARRA dollars are meeting some of these needs; we have also used contracted childcare slots to expand the number of slots for children and families in greatest need, including for homeless children and teen parents.

EEC is also working hard to support non-native English speaking constituents to access EEC's programs and services. The meaningful participation of diverse individuals is critical if we are to effect change in services for all children and families. Thus, it is important that policies and procedures reflect EEC's commitment to achieve participation of diverse individuals. EEC has integrated in many of its current initiatives a series of activities that support English Language Learners in early education and care and out of school time programs, such as initiatives that address the learning needs of diverse student populations including English language learners and dual language learners by improving the quality of instruction and providing more differentiated instruction and individualized support.

Looking Ahead

Toward realizing its vision, the Department continues to identify the projects that will define its work in the next months and years. One key priority will be the building of a new statewide data system, giving us information that will enable us to better serve all children—especially those who are most at-risk. Moreover, as we make significant strides in the development of a sophisticated professional development system including a professional development registry, we must also determine how to evaluate and measure our efforts. For example, are the new online courses for early childhood educators that are offered through the University of Massachusetts/Boston making a difference? Similarly, how do we think about leadership and management in early childhood settings? What are the necessary skills for supporting adult learning? And as we measure the quality of early education and care settings, how do we measure student growth within those settings? Finally, there is important work to do in de-coupling access to services from parental work status, so that early education and care becomes a birthright for every child in the Commonwealth, and an asset to community and economic development across the state.