



Remarks by Karen Ponder on September 16, 2015 at BUILD's meeting on State/Community Connections in Pittsburgh, PA

My Work, My Passion-----Bringing it Home

At this time of year, I'm a bit nostalgic and a little sad when it's back to school time. I hear children discussing who their teachers will be and teachers talking about preparing their classrooms for the new school year. It always takes me back to inviting a new group of four year olds into my classroom and watching them enter with energy, excitement, and wonder....and for some, a sense of uncertainty.

I started my life's work as a kindergarten teacher, then graduated to teaching 4 year olds. Nothing I've ever done has been quite as exciting as that classroom of children, getting to know their families and building relationships and a partnership with them on behalf of their children. I miss working with the other teachers and sharing ideas and inspirations. And later on, when I directed early childhood programs, I miss my role as, in Paula Jorde Bloom's words, the gatekeeper of quality....claiming the responsibility and doing what it takes to provide high quality early learning experiences.

I remember back to my first years of teaching and how eager I was to learn. One of the first things I did was join SECA, then NAEYC, and when I went to my first state conference, I can still recall the sheer joy I felt when I realized that there were people all over my state who were eager to learn like I was and I remember the excitement of hearing new ideas and learning from amazing presenters. That's where I first heard about accreditation and later when I began directing a weekday school for young children, I led our program to being one of the first programs in NC to be accredited by NAEYC- before there were computers to organize files...where you guarded with your life "the box" with all your papers, files, and checklists in it.

So for 20 years I taught, directed, and taught teachers.....and loved every day of it. I could witness the growth in young children, their families and teachers. I could help families get the outside resources they needed, and our school was the best place ever for children, families and teachers. And one night in the late 80's, I was driving back to Raleigh very late after doing teacher training on developmentally appropriate practice for a child care program about 3 hours away. We had had a great time. And I was convinced I had sold the value of accreditation and was feeling good about the work I had done.

But, just as I was leaving the school, the director pulled me aside and said, "Karen, you see how much my teachers want to do all that you suggested. Well, here's the problem. It's hard for us to meet minimal licensing standards because we operate on such a shoestring. Parents are paying all they can afford, which isn't much. And subsidies are so low, we can barely survive. Sending teachers back to school..... improving our ratios....even changing the physical space to meet the requirements.....they are just not possible."

I look back at that night and realize that that particular conversation was a marker for me. The reality hit me in the face. It is going to take way more than "preaching" about the importance of high quality early education and trying to help individuals and groups around us. We need a dramatic change.....something way bigger than what we're doing now or have even thought about.... but I had no idea what that might be, because you see, at that time, early childhood and early education were not widely understood to be vital to a child's future education. No one was talking about building partnerships on behalf of young children and their families. No one was talking about a campaign for young children. We were only beginning to hear a little bit about brain development. In fact, brain development research was such a game changer, I still have a copy of that first Time Magazine with the brain on it! Those of us who taught and parents of course, knew that something magical was going on in the early years that related to learning and thriving....but many people, including policymakers, thought that anybody could babysit with little children and that frankly, it wasn't the state's problem to take care of little kids.

So fast forward a year. In 1992, Governor Hunt was elected as governor of NC, running on the promise of building a statewide campaign for young children. He had been the education governor in 2 prior administrations and realized while being out of office and having grandchildren, that he may have missed the most important part of education.....

And so, he made early childhood his number 1 agenda item and I was fortunate to help him and many smart people in my state think about what should be done, and I had the opportunity to lead that work. What we had experienced up to that point were lots of programs with varying levels of quality.....each operating on its own.....and children whose families had resources could choose the better programs....and children whose families received subsidies so they could work could choose "subsidized" programs, the poorest quality in our state....and many children had no options for early education or other supports. A book about the state of child care had just been released and NC was the poster child for having the worst standards and some of the poorest child care in the nation.

So we set out to do something big. We recognized that families were key to early childhood progress. And we believed that a mixed delivery system was best for families. We also knew that many programs that families had access to were not as good as their children deserved. We acknowledged the fact that if we truly cared about the well being of every child, we had to consider health, mental health, family engagement, empowerment and support, teacher education and the quality of all of our early learning programs----family child care, child care, Head Start and public schools. And informal settings as well.

These realities led us to the idea of a comprehensive system for all children from birth until they started to kindergarten, with special priority given to children with high risk factors, and high quality as a hallmark for all programs and services. And more importantly, we recognized that as much as we wanted to do this at the state level, and regardless of funding, programs and services we offered, the only way to connect at the service level was through communities.

If we were to account for ALL children and understand their needs and the desires and needs of their families, a local entity was needed to be accountable for the children, so we chose a county based model to roll out what the Governor named Smart Start. And so each Smart Start office was a new nonprofit, signaling that Smart Start was not some agency's new program, but it belonged to all the people and the communities.

The job of these local Smart Start offices was/is to coordinate all things early childhood. Each of them is responsible for connecting with and supporting and learning from the communities within their counties. They use population data to find unserved or underserved children. They are a one stop shop for families to access resources they need. They are accountable on an annual basis for specific outcomes that the entire community helps to achieve. And they learn from the numerous communities within their jurisdiction, and support them to get better results for their young children. They are the partnership for children.

A state level non-profit, the NC Partnership for Children, was created to administer and give support to the local partnerships and to work in close collaboration with state agencies and organizations to achieve greater results for young children. Helping to create and launch 75 Smart Start offices covering all 100 counties, making sure they were fiscally and programmatically accountable, and supporting them to achieve community wide outcomes was the hardest work I've ever done.....and it was very rewarding. It was hard because, in some ways, we were making things up.....there were no tool kits of resources for this kind of work. We based our strategies on the best research we had at the time.....and we had to prove and defend what we were doing constantly. And it was rewarding in that we literally watched as a revolution for children took place around us.

And over time we watched the statistics change.....from the worst child care in the nation to almost all of our children in 3, 4 and 5 star care. And all children whose families receive financial support to help with their child care, in 4 and 5 star care statewide. We saw a revolution for children with special needs.....all of them in 4 and 5 star rated programs and all of them in programs along with their typically developing peers. And while each program and service was tracking its results, overall we saw the end of grade test scores become the most improved in the nation. And eventually there was a large increase in high school graduation rates, among other indicators.

After 15 years, I left Smart Start and found myself exploring other state early childhood systems and as you know there is a lot of variation on the theme. And the variation depends on context, politics and the leadership, among other things. You are all doing amazing work and I have learned so much from all of you. So what have I learned and what is clear to me from the journey?

Here is what is clear:

1. We have made an incredible amount of progress toward the goal that all children will arrive at school healthy and prepared for school and life. Each person in this room has seized opportunities and contributed countless hours of hard work, a commitment to changing outcomes and unrelenting determination to support young children to succeed, to get us to this point. You are indeed the true heroes!
2. Families are the key to our nation's future. Their nurturing and interactions, their goals and expectations for their children, and their ability to get the needed resources to support their children are critical and we can each help as we engage with and empower them. We will be thinking here in Pittsburgh over the next few days about how families have voice in policies, programs and practices. And how state and local leaders facilitate family engagement and empowerment. Do join in these discussions because each of you has something to contribute to the conversation.

3. I believe that states and communities should be organized to best support families and states are moving the needle for children and families in creating state, local and community structures. This state, local and community work focuses collectively on particular outcomes and works in partnership to achieve them. We must not continue parallel play but think deeply about structural changes that will help reduce duplication, account for all children and maximize our collective impact.
4. Significant progress has also been made over the past 20 years in putting in place statewide governance systems of early care and education. These range from coordinated systems to consolidated systems to creating new systems, under one auspice. And some states are formally connecting the state level system to a local or community system. During the meeting this week you will hear from some of the pioneers in systems building work, from all 3 levels---- the state, local and community.
5. We now have quality rating and improvement systems in place in almost every state. The main reasons they are important.....to improve the quality of all early learning programs, regardless of location and auspice, so that they are good enough to meet the needs of our children,. And to help families choose high quality programs for their children.
6. It is sad to observe that while we have made huge progress throughout our states, early childhood programs and services are not equitable for all children. We have much more work to do to assure that programs, policies and resources achieving equitable access and outcomes for each and every young child and their family. When presidential candidates can speak about immigrant families (from which most of us descended) in such disrespectful, and I would suggest, inhumane ways, and people applaud, we know that it will continue to be challenging to assure that all public policy supports the best environments and supports for all our children.
7. We have made significant progress in serving 4 year olds in pre-kindergarten programs. While some states are using a cross sector approach, others are implementing exclusively within public schools. This work should continue until all 4 year olds are served in programs that maintain high standards.
8. The younger a child is, the less likely her needs are being met in our state early childhood systems. My new mantra is, "Let's start at the beginning." I love 4 year olds and if I were going to teach for another 20 years, that's the age group I would choose. And I completely understand why it's easier to get funding for 4 year olds.....they look more like traditional students in classroom settings. But we can't let the fact that people get 4 year olds and preK, keep us from meeting the needs of babies and toddlers. Let's start at the beginning and build funding strategies for babies into our preK and other funding opportunities as a prevention fund.

So where do we go from here? Here are some thoughts.

1. I want to suggest that in ALL our work, we think about family support, family engagement, not as a topic or area of work but with understanding that family engagement and empowerment are ways of treating and being with families, a way of building relationships, and a way of learning from them....all in the best interest of their children! Families, not teachers, are the experts on their children, and those of us who work with families have more to learn than we can teach and the partnerships we build with families and what we learn from them should guide all of our work.

2. To better assure that all children are accounted for and that their needs are met prior to school, comprehensive and equitable systems should be put in place in all our states. Systems that assure that all families have access to programs and services that are right for them regardless of their language, race, class or culture. The increasing racial and economic disparities in our nation demand that we look harder for solutions, that we make decisions about funding and programs, based on population data, and that we continue to seek opportunities to reduce disparities. And in the words of Paul Schmitz, "To do equity, we must also be equity. We must examine our own composition, culture and policies that reinforce and perpetuate societal disparities."

3. I believe we should continue to build governance systems that include the state, local and community levels.... linked together in a formal way, with feedback loops in all directions, if we are to get the outcomes we're all striving for. Unless yours is a very small state, state to neighborhoods is a big leap. Having an intermediary entity, which I refer to as local, that includes cross sector leadership, and is accountable to the state and to the communities and neighborhoods within its jurisdiction, appears to be a way to organize systematically to get stronger results. Bringing together, educating and empowering cross sector leaders increases the sustainability of early childhood efforts. And state systems must be grounded and informed by the programs that are implemented locally.

4. Let's continue to improve the quality of all programs that serve young children, regardless of auspice. Allowing families to choose the best option for their child and family needs, within a mixed delivery system, is important in the early years. And making sure that whatever program a family wants and needs is the best quality possible, is family friendly for working families and child serving as well.

5. Remember the babies! Learning starts before birth. We don't get children to school ready to learn, we get them there ready to succeed and it starts at the beginning. I was pleased to learn that the American Association of Pediatrics has issued a recent statement about starting at birth to empower parents to assure their babies/preschool children experience optimal early brain and language development. If we're going to pick only one year and pour all of our energy and resources into it, if we believe the brain research, it has to be the first year.

6. Continue to support a high quality workforce that includes principals, directors and teachers. Until principals and directors of early childhood learning programs are well educated about how little children think and learn, what good early learning environments should be like, and why active learning is the most effective way for young children to thrive and be good thinkers.....we will not get to nor maintain a high level of quality, regardless of how hard we try.

There is still a lot of variation and opinions about the level of education that teachers need. In addition to formal education, I want a workforce that understands developmentally appropriate practice; ages and stages of development and how that translates to what teachers and children should be doing; and how as a teacher you should be a facilitator of learning, of questioning, of what will happen if? So that we can stop teaching to the test but instilling in young children a love of learning and a thirst for knowledge.

I asked Sharon Ritchie at FPG, what in a nutshell she and her colleagues have learned in their First Schools research in early childhood classrooms and she said simply, "Let the children talk and let the children play!" We need a workforce that truly gets that concept!

7. Find ways to harness the power of communities even more than we are doing now since communities are where children and families live and where children are supported and educated. Neighborhoods and communities are the most vital part of any system of early care and education. Some states are building off of their already existing great community work to expand into a statewide system. The capacity of communities must be built to address issues of structural inequities such as transportation, unstable housing, and food insecurity. This week you will hear from some community leaders, including some from Pennsylvania, who are implementing some very innovative community programs and strategies. They have a lot to teach all of us.

8. And finally, we must continue building networks to advocate for and lobby on behalf of young children. The education/advocacy work is ongoing....there are things we need to do every day to educate and advocate and we must not shirk these responsibilities.

Closing:

As I close I want to thank each one of you all you're doing for young children and their families. From parentingto teaching.....to managing programs and direct services.....to running local and statewide systems and collaboratives.....to consulting and assisting state and local leaders..... regardless of what you do.....You are here because your work matters and is a piece of a very large puzzle that has young children and their families at it's heart and includes all that it takes to ensure that all our states' and nations' children succeed in school and life. I am awed by all that you do.

Thank you.