

BACK TO BASICS:
ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF AN AMERICAN EARLY CARE AND
EDUCATION SYSTEM

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INTRODUCTION

As America considers its current and potential investments in young children, the prevailing focus (and rationale) seems to be on producing youngsters who are ready for school, youngsters who meet standards, and youngsters who are adept at pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills. So prevalent is this sentiment that White House Conferences, scores of articles in the popular and academic press, and teacher training and re-training efforts focusing on readiness, standards, and skills pepper policy debates and initiatives. Some entitle this zeitgeist, the return to “basics” in early care and education. And in this sense, the “basics” of early childhood pedagogy is being more clearly defined.

Yet, awash with attention, the critically important press for literacy and standards somewhat obfuscates another set of equally important basics to the functioning of American early care and education. This second set of “basics” refers to what it takes to make early care and education programs function so that they can, indeed, provide the quality services necessary to achieve the “basics” of today’s common parlance.

Just what constitutes this second, and all important, set of basics and why are they so important? This article suggests that these “hidden basics” are at the very core of every critical policy question that must be faced as policymakers and advocates seek to expand American early care and education: How should quality services be incentivized? How can we break down the heretofore segregated approach to services? Who should

take the lead in administering and/regulating such efforts? How do we know that such efforts are working and for what populations do services work best? What will such efforts cost? Where is it best to invest scarce resources? And finally, what actually constitutes a system of early care and education?

These questions, and scores like them, can only be answered when we understand that early care and education, like all other services, is comprised not only of the direct services that parents and children receive, but also includes an *infrastructure* that uniquely enables the direct services to function effectively and efficiently. Together, it is the infrastructure and direct services that comprise the system of early care and education.

Not glamorous, catchy or well-understood words, *infrastructure* and *system* are often neglected in important discussions of early childhood policy. They are regarded as “vague” and deemed “remote” from the daily realities that face parents and children. Little could be further from the truth. Infrastructure is the sine qua non of quality; it is the essential ingredient that enables expansion and excellence. Systems are what make the pieces function, what enables investments to yield returns, and what congeals highly disparate, idiosyncratic, and episodic efforts on behalf of young children and their families.

This paper is about the all-important and hidden “basics,” the system and the infrastructure. It considers the nature of systems, revealing that, to date, there is no single or uniform definition of an early care and education system or of its infrastructure. It considers why this is the case, and discusses the liability of continuing to mount programs in the absence of such definitions. It offers a working definition of an early care and education system, and of its infrastructure. The paper unequivocally states that unless the system and the infrastructure are addressed and supported, there is little opportunity for achieving quality and the desired outcomes now being touted. The article concludes with concrete, operational suggestions for consideration as part of New York’s Universal Pre-kindergarten effort.

WHY A “SYSTEM” AND WHY INFRASTRUCTURE?

Over a period of years, investments in early care and education have dramatically increased both at the federal and state levels. If one examines the trajectory of these investments even in the recent years, we see that “total spending for child development and family support efforts has increased by almost 90% since data were collected in 1998” (Cuathen, Knitzer, & Ripple, 2000). State investments alone totaled over 3.7 billion in 2000, a dramatic increase over a mere two-year period.

Yet, despite this rapid and significant infusion of dollars, concerns about the quality of services and their ability to yield and sustain the outcomes desired by policymakers remain prevalent. When the Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study was released in 1995 (Cost, Quality, & Outcomes Study Team, 1995), even those closest to the field were surprised by its findings related to the pervasiveness of low and mediocre quality care. Then, and still today, we correctly ask: How can quality be so low when so many centers and programs are being accredited? When so many quality initiatives are being funded? When investments are increasing so? When parents are paying the most they can pay, often more for child care than for college tuition?

Not simple, there are two answers. First, and most important, the resources to establish quality, despite quality set asides in the Child Care Development Fund and in Head Start, along with state efforts, are insufficient to meet the true costs of American child care. Unlike other nations with whom we are routinely compared, America’s public investment in early care and education remains distressingly low. So, the first critical issue revolves around how much is being expended on young children, and by whom.

Inadequate resources, while the most important issue, are not the only issue. We need to understand that how resources are spent is also critically important. Historically, our public investments in early care and education have been directed to providing direct services to children and families, and to increasing the supply of services. Some, but far,

far less attention has been accorded to the quality of those services. And even less attention has been paid to nurturing the activities and supports that nourish quality. For example, even though study after study has found that states with more stringent regulations tend have higher quality programs (Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Team, 1995), few states have strengthened, and many have, in fact, relaxed, their regulations. While we have learned that wage enhancements are directly related to increased quality in programs (Bell, Burton, Shukla, & Whitebook, 1997), increases in wages have remained the purview of special (and worthwhile) efforts, rather than a prevailing characteristic of all early care and education efforts.

Abrogation of research, characteristic of many social sciences, clearly looms large in early care and education. It is particularly problematic in early care and education now, however, because we have an opportunity to redirect a portion of the significant investments that are being made. Indeed, rather than focusing all new dollars on direct services, quality enhancement would stand a far better chance if some portion of the investments were devoted to supporting the infrastructure and building a durable, coordinated system of early care and education. The challenge, however, is that we are unclear as to what we mean by a system and what we mean by infrastructure.

HOW HAS “SYSTEM” BEEN DEFINED IN THE PAST?

Webster defines a system as “a set or arrangement of things so related or connected as to form a unity or organic whole (e.g., a solar system, school system, system of highways)” (Webster, 1970, p. 1445). Note that the nomenclature “school system” is so common place that Webster uses it as an exemplar. This popularity of “school system” stands in stark contrast to the notion of an “early care and education system” not only in Webster’s nomenclature, but also in reality. To think of schools as functioning within the context of a system is normative; to think of early care and education functioning within the context of a system is not, even in an era when so many parallels are drawn between compulsory (K-12) education and early childhood education.

Although it is not common to consider a system of early care and education, in the past decade such conceptualizations and nomenclature have begun to appear. For example, in 1991, Jule Sugarman discussed the characteristics of an early childhood system. He noted that while early childhood programs were gaining increased attention at the federal level, “what is missing is a sense of what system(s) would best accomplish our national objective” (Sugarman, 1991, p. xi). He suggested that the characteristics of an early childhood system had elements “with respect to” the child’s program, service availability, protecting children, health and mental health, families and social services, staff, environment, funding, providers, nutrition, and other matters. For each of these items, Sugarman spelled out a set of indicators (See Appendix A).

Taking a different approach, the Essential Functions and Change Strategies Task Force of the *Quality 2000 Initiative* (1993) suggested that there were five essential functions that composed the early care and education system, including: (1) collaborative planning and cross-system linkages; (2) consumer and public engagement; (3) quality assurance; (4) professional and workforce development; and (5) financing (See Appendix B). In addition to creating sub-themes for each of the five functions, this group noted that functions were specialized or essential components of the whole; “a function implies performance and action essential to the operation of the system” (Essential Functions and Change Strategies Task Force, 1993, p.11). A function is a part of, but not a replacement for, a system.

Emanating from this work, *Not by Chance* identified eight components of an early care and education system (Kagan & Cohen, 1997, Appendix C):

- (1) quality programs;
- (2) child-based, results-driven system;
- (3) parent and family engagement;
- (4) individual licensing;
- (5) professional preparation;
- (6) program licensing;

- (7) funding and financing; and
- (8) governance, planning, and accountability.

As important as is the list of components, *Not by Chance* proffered a definition of the infrastructure and the system. It suggested that a system consisted of the above eight components and that all eight components had to be present for a system of early care and education to exist. Stated as a somewhat unconventional formula “ $8 - 1 = 0$,” *Not by Chance* suggested that if even one component of the system is taken away, the system could not function as a system: the net result would be 0 or a non-system. Equally important, *Not by Chance* suggested another formula: the system (or all 8 components) was comprised of programs (Component 1) + the infrastructure (Components 2-8). Definitionally then, it is programs plus the infrastructure that equal or comprise the system.

THE CURRENT STATUS OF INFRASTRUCTURE/ SYSTEMS – THINKING AND DOING

As analytic as these definitions are, their utility emerges only when they are absorbed into more broad scale thinking and planning. In reality, there is actually little agreement on just what a system of early care and education is. Each state, each leader, each policy maker, seems to be etching out their own definition. Like the veritable and venerable Rorschach Test, early care and education systems seem to derive individual meaning in and from the eye of the beholder.

On the one hand, such differences in interpretation are welcome. They provide the maximum amount of flexibility to states as they craft their early care and education policies. This approach does not limit ingenuity or invention, with the result that incredibly exciting efforts are being mounted to augment and enrich direct services to children. In addition, such variation leaves us with, however unintended, a natural experiment whereby states can glean workable strategies and ideas from others. Often a pioneer state will create an effort that supports one component of the system and, when it

is reviewed by other states, it is modified and improved, sometimes causing the pioneer state to alter its effort. As such, there is not only a cumulative building of efforts, but also an approach that promotes their continuous improvement. Finally, an advantage of the “non-systematization” of the system is that the different efforts could be subjected to qualitative and comparative evaluation.

On the other hand, the lack of a common understanding of what is meant by a system of early care and education leaves policy makers and practitioners in somewhat of a quandary. Lacking clear direction, often policy initiatives focus on one element of the system one year, and another element the next year. There is limited long-term planning, replicating the episodic nature that has so long characterized early care and education program development. Having a clear definition and clear direction will reduce the helter-skelter approach to policy. Further, without the definition of a system, there will be no organized way to ascertain that all the elements of a system are being addressed. A Martian, or even a scholar from another country, might peer at the United States and discern that same kind of unsystematic, chaotic development of early childhood programs is now characterizing the development of early childhood systems.

So prevalent are these efforts to build a system that the most recent Map and Track edition has a special category in its state-by-state report entitled “Early Childhood Systems Development” (Cauthen, et. al, 2000). The authors sum up the situation well: “Recognizing that developing individual programs is not sufficient to address the multiple needs of young children and families, state policy makers are increasingly attending to early childhood system development—developing the infrastructure, resources, and leadership necessary to create a coordinated system of services and supports to address the many needs of young children and their families (Cauthen, et. al, 2000, p. 8).

But how coordinated and how comprehensive are these services really? On the positive side, many states, in addition to funding direct programs and services, are funding components of the infrastructure. Termed “direct services +” in this paper, these

efforts typically provide for direct services to children and families + one or two other components of the infrastructure. In some cases, these noteworthy “direct services +” include funding new supports for staff to achieve better training and compensation. For example, Rhode Island’s RiteCare Health Insurance provides health insurance for child care center staff whose programs serve state subsidized children. North Carolina’s TEACH and WAGES models (now being replicated in many other states) provide educational scholarships and the potential for increased wages for people working in early care and education settings. In other states, “direct services +” means that funds are provided for facilities expansion. For example, Connecticut has appropriated money to support lowering the debt owed by providers on revenue bonds for new facilities. Early education providers who build new facilities are responsible for only 20% of the debt spread out over 30 years. In still other states, “direct services +” means establishing mechanisms that facilitate coordination and policy development. For example, Hawaii has established its Good Beginnings Alliance, a statewide public/private partnership that works to plan and coordinate services for young children. Indiana has its Building Bright Beginnings effort, a governor’s initiative that has both an Advisory team and a Center that work to coordinate and assess services, and to disseminate information to policy makers. These efforts, and many like them, clearly indicate that the idea of supporting the infrastructure is becoming more normative.

This progress has not been easy, given both the nation’s penchant to legislate incrementally and its predilection to invest in direct services. As a result, these efforts warrant accolades, as do the ardent pioneers who conceived, advocated for, and implemented them.

Yet, there is a problem. Only a handful of efforts are truly addressing the entire system. Few states have efforts in all eight components of the system. Clearly, addressing one, two, or even three components of the system, while better than addressing none and extremely important, will not render the kind of quality improvement needed over the long haul. For example, despite considerable, diverse investments in training and professional development, which is often thought to be at the

very heart of early care and education, gains in quality are modest. Where more robust gains appear, it is often because a combination of improvements exists. North Carolina is an excellent example: the state, through a variety of efforts including Smart Start, TEACH, and regulatory changes, has demonstrated improvements in child outcomes. Combining lessons from practice in North Carolina and from theoretical work on systems development, it is imperative that we not stop at “direct services +.” We must press ourselves to consider the system in its entirety.

How can this be done in a nation characterized by episodic and flirtatious investments in children? In a nation where legislative and bureaucratic structures foster categorical programmatic separations? In a nation that is reluctant to value early care and education as a national imperative? Though not definitive or the sole answer, one response is to do what business and other disciplines and fields have done routinely; notably to acknowledge the importance of long-term strategic planning and to develop incremental operational strategies aligned to the long-term plan. Stated differently, it is having a dream *and* developing sequentially and systematically the process to achieve it. This approach suggests that creating a detailed vision or plan for the early care and education system is the requisite first step, to be followed by the development of implementation plans that can be aligned with legislative initiatives over a period of years.

Is this, indeed *can* this, be done? As states have considered expanding their services to young children, some have begun to shift from a program approach to considering the development of a system. Delaware, in its Early Success effort, developed a long-range blueprint that advanced the existence of a system. Building incrementally, Delaware is moving toward the enactment of a comprehensive system of services. Likewise, Massachusetts has developed such a similar, comprehensive plan (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2001) as has North Carolina and California (Mitchell, Stoney, & Dichter, 2001).

New York State has such an opportunity now. The New York State Education Law Sub-part 151-1 that addressed UPK did not only focus on direct services for children, but suggested that six dimensions were critical and needed to be considered: universal access, diversity, collaboration, developmentally appropriate practice, teacher preparation, and financing. So important were these dimensions that they guided the program requirements for the UPK program and framed the conceptualization of the UPK efforts as more than a programmatic one. UPK has been envisioned not in isolation but as Leikes and Cochran note “in the context of the broader early care and education system” (2001, p 59). The authors go on to suggest that, “The existing system not only contributes to shaping the development of hundreds of thousands of preschoolers in New York State, it also operates as a vital support system for the families to which those preschoolers belong” (quoted in Leikes & Cochran, 2001, p. 59, emphasis added). As such, New York State appears to have a mandate to transcend programmatic thinking and move to systemic long-term planning that defines and envisions a system of early care and education.

DEFINING THE BASIC ELEMENTS OF THE EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION SYSTEM

As has been noted, much work has been done to define the elements of an early care and education systemic vision in the past decade. To some extent, these efforts have shared some common elements that could be used to form the “basics” of an early care and education system. Building from the *Quality 2000 Initiative* and its report, *Not by Chance*, the following eight components are proffered for consideration for those interested in designing a long-term vision for an early care and education system. Elements of the system that need to be considered include both the numbered components and the lettered sub-components.

I. QUALITY PROGRAMS

At the core of any system must be a set of direct services to children and families that are of high quality and that are easily accessible.

- A. Create Learning Environments and Opportunities
Includes the effective use of materials, curriculum, and pedagogy, including multi-age and flexible grouping of children, effective staff deployment, attentiveness to cultural and linguistic variation, appropriate balance between academic and play activities.

- B. Advance Children’s Healthy Development
Includes attention to children’s physical and mental health by either providing or accessing appropriate screenings, immunizations, and services.

- C. Foster Accreditation
Includes supports for participating in accreditation and for the improvements accreditation necessitates.

- D. Create and Maintain Links with Community Resources including Resource and Referral Agencies
Includes the on-going linkages with schools, resource and referral agencies, and other community services. This component stresses support for these agencies.

- E. Create and Maintain Links with Family Child Care
Includes supporting family child care and family child care networks.

II. ACCOUNTABILITY (CHILD-BASED, RESULTS-DRIVEN SYSTEM)

- A. Define Appropriate Results
Includes the establishment of state-wide and/or community-wide system of results across all domains of development, with appropriate benchmarks. Parents and professionals must be included in the development of such results.
- B. Establish Mechanisms to Collect Results Appropriately
Includes the development of data collection strategies that take the ages and abilities of young children into consideration.
- C. Assure that Results are Used Appropriately
Includes the establishment of appropriate safeguards so that data collected will not be used to label, track, or stigmatize young children, but that data will be useful to policy makers as they plan increased services for young children and their families.

III. PARENT, FAMILY, COMMUNITY, AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

- A. Support Parents as Consumers
Assure that parents have options as they use early care and education services.
- B. Increase Workplace Commitments to Families and Business and Community Involvement in Early Care and Education
Assure that incentives are provided for American businesses to be family-friendly in their policies and practices, and to be involved in advancing legislative and community supports for early care and education.

- C. Increase Community Awareness of Early Care and Education
Provision for the development of ongoing opportunities for the public to gain information regarding the status of young children and their families.

IV. INDIVIDUAL CREDENTIALING

- A. Credential All who Work with Young Children
Create an appropriate set of credentials so that all who work with young children have the ability to gain transferable credentials. This suggests that the licensing of facilities should be distinct from the credentialing of individuals.
- B. Create the Credentialing System and Compensate Teachers Accordingly
Assure that credentials that are developed are instantiated in state regulations and are accompanied by appropriate salaries and benefits.
- C. Create Administrator/Director/Master Teacher and Leadership Credentials
Recognize that an array of opportunities for adults exist in early care and education and create credentials for them.

V. IMPROVE THE CONTENT OF, AND RESOURCES FOR, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- A. Examine the content of all preparation programs to assure that they are up-to-date and focused on producing developmentally appropriate outcomes.

- B. Create the content and incentives to assure that Administrator/Director/Master Teacher content is appropriate for their diverse roles and responsibilities.
- C. Create opportunities for advocacy and leadership development in all sectors of the early care and education system.

VI. PROGRAM LICENSING

- A. Eliminate Exemptions
Assure that all programs serving young children are subject to state regulation.
- B. Streamline, Coordinate and Adequately Fund Facility Licensing
Assure that licensing is efficient and that it is funded at levels sufficient to assure its completion.
- C. Promote National Guidelines
Create and/or support the promulgation of a set of National Licensing Standards that can be used as guidelines for states.

VII. FUNDING AND FINANCING

- A. Identify the Costs of A Quality System
Assure that all fiscal projections include the cost of funding the infrastructure and the full cost of care.
- B. Raise Staff Compensation
Staff compensation in early care and education should be commensurate with that of public schools, given equal education and experience of staff.

C. Identify Revenue Sources

Discern short and long term revenue sources that can fund the early care and education system.

VIII. GOVERNANCE, PLANNING AND PROGRAM ACCOUNTABILITY

A. Establish Governance Mechanisms at the State Level

Such mechanisms should durably provide for the oversight of the early care and education field. Such mechanisms might be Boards, Cabinets, or other structures, but they must be durable and take responsibility for planning, assessment, distribution of resources, and agenda setting.

B. Establish Governance Mechanisms at the Local Level

Create mechanisms at the local level that will coordinate the delivery of services, assure the effective use of funds, provision for the infrastructure, and coordinate efforts with the State Governance Mechanism.

CAN THIS BE ACHIEVED, AND IF SO, HOW?

Is this a stretch? Is it too bold to consider? Where do we begin? There is no question that we are a long way from implementing all components of an early care and education system. Yet, if we look back just a few years, the idea of a system, the idea of developing an infrastructure, were not even in the lexicon. Today, armed with better research and greater public support than ever before, we sit on the cusp of making decisions that will impact the future of American early care and education and the life chances of millions of youngsters in the years to come.

Rather than asking can this be achieved, we must turn our energies and discourse to discerning how this vision can be achieved. Simple to state, but not simple to do, the journey begins by coalescing knowledgeable and caring people to develop a state plan. The state plan must address all components of the system. It must delineate strategies for each. Then the state must be self-critical and undertake an honest assessment of where it sits in each component. By identifying existing programs and projects that exist either at the state or local level and slotting them in to one of the components, it will quickly be apparent where voids exist and, therefore, where work is necessary.

Once the “work” components are identified, a timeline over a period of years can be established. The point is not to achieve all elements at once, but rather to have a strategic vision and timeline of what and when each area will be addressed. Establishing benchmarks for accomplishment will provide for the tracking of progress.

Engaging legislators and business leaders in the process helps tremendously. Once the power elite have a clear understanding of what is needed, why it is needed, and how it will help them, commandeering funds is less difficult. Armed with a clear plan and a crisp conception of what it will take to achieve the enactment of a system within a decade, early care and education advocates can enjoin together to advocate collaboratively. While the stakes are high, as are the opportunities for investment, now it is clear that a sensible, no-nonsense vision for early care and education has shown the potential to have staying power over time.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NEW YORK STATE

It has been noted that in order to have dreams come true, we must first dream. New York’s early childhood community has had dreams for decades and, in having them, has often led the nation. Today is no exception. Armed with the excellent Universal Pre-kindergarten legislation, New York stands ready to carry on with its long tradition of leadership. The challenge at hand is not to squander the opportunity by thinking narrowly or by thinking in the short-term. Developing a system is near at hand; the

challenge is to seize the opportunity and to settle for nothing less than a comprehensive plan and strategy that will create the most effective system of early care and education that America has seen. In so doing, we will reaffirm that achieving the “basics” being called for by the popular press and policy makers will never be achieved unless the basics of an early care and education system are well in place.

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