



TO: Senator M. Teresa Ruiz and Members, Senate Education Committee
FROM: Cecilia Zalkind, Executive Director
Advocates for Children of New Jersey
DATE: March 3, 2016
RE: **Package of Early Childhood Bills (S973, S997, S1454, S1455, S1456)**

As an organization dedicated to the success and well-being of all children in New Jersey and the improvement of early childhood systems throughout the state, Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) applauds the package of early childhood bills that you have sponsored. ACNJ thanks you for highlighting these critical issues. These bills serve as an important step towards helping all young children receive the opportunities they deserve.

After a careful review of the above early childhood bills, ACNJ urges you to consider the following issues, which we believe will strengthen the bills and better serve children and families:

S997- Preschool Expansion

For nearly a decade, ACNJ has been a strong supporter of expanding New Jersey's nationally recognized, high-quality state-funded preschool to more children throughout the state. ACNJ is happy to see that this bill would provide such access to quality preschool to children in communities most in need. Such access will ensure that more children are entering kindergarten with the skills necessary for school and in life.

S973 – Early Childhood Innovation Act

ACNJ welcomes the use of innovative funding structures to pilot early childhood services projects. The pay-for-success model provides a potential for new funding streams for high-quality programs. However, ACNJ recommends providing clarification regarding the types of measures and savings for early childhood programs. For example, in some existing early childhood pay-for-success programs, one measure of savings has been reduced spending on children with disabilities, which may shift incentives towards under-identification or decreased services for those students. ACNJ recommends that any pay-for-success program include safeguards to address this possibility.

S1454 – Creating a Department of Early Childhood

For several years, ACNJ has examined the feasibility of creating a separate department that addresses the comprehensive education and needs of young children and their families. Housing all early childhood services in one department has the potential to resolve critical problems in coordination, provide better quality, improve access to services, and be more cost-effective. While the state has

taken steps to create a stronger system of coordinated education and care, the system still remains fragmented, and consequently impacts children and their needs.

The proposed Department of Early Childhood has the potential to elevate the importance of a comprehensive and coordinated approach to addressing the needs of young children and their families. There are complex issues however, in creating such a department. This is particularly a challenge for those programs that service a broader age-range of children. For example, removing PreK-3 from the Department of Education (DOE) into a new department may have implications for the continuity and alignment of educational programs beyond third grade. Additionally, the success of New Jersey's high-quality preschool program can largely be attributed to where it is housed. By being a part of DOE, the state has demonstrated its commitment to preschool and its importance in the overall education of students. These issues should be taken into consideration for any future plans.

Given the wide range of programs that touch the lives of these children and the variety of funding streams to fund such programs, ACNJ suggests that two initial steps be taken:

1. A thorough inventory of all existing programs and responsibilities that would be affected by the creation of such a department. This includes a review of funding including state and federal restrictions.
2. An examination of similar departments that have been created in other states. For example, Massachusetts currently has a Department of Early Education and Care that addresses issues of children between the ages of birth through five, but preschool is retained in the state's Elementary and Secondary Department.

ACNJ urges careful consideration and clarification of the following questions before moving forward that might affect existing programs and departments:

Department of Agriculture

Child Nutrition Programs. The Department of Agriculture has significant experience in expanding the number of children participating in federally funded child nutrition programs through schools, municipalities, and nonprofit organizations, as well as the wide range of ages served by such programs. We agree with the amendment that the child nutrition programs should stay in the Department of Agriculture.

Department of Children and Families

Abuse or Neglect. The bill as currently drafted does not indicate whether the Division of Child Protection and Permanency (DCP&P), as well as related services, are to remain in DCF. ACNJ urges that DCP&P remain in DCF.

Infant/Toddler and Early Childhood Mental Health. New Jersey's child mental health system does not currently address the needs of young children, despite the growing understanding of the importance of behavioral and mental health. The bill as currently written does not address this gap in services.

DCF currently operates the Children's System of Care, which administers children's behavioral and mental health services. PerformCare New Jersey, which contracts with the state to determine the level of such services for a particular child, states that it helps children ages 5-21. Although the most recent DCF data show that some children aged 0-5 have been authorized to

receive services, no comprehensive system exists to address these children's needs. The vast majority of services were delivered for adolescents and young adults (ages 13-20). Addressing this gap between behavioral and mental health services should either be included in the proposal for a new department or delivered through the DCF program.

Department of Education

Should preschool be included in a new department, the following related issues would need to be addressed:

Programs affecting both early childhood and elementary students. ACNJ is concerned how program and funding divisions will take place for those programs that currently affect children beyond the birth to 8 continuum. For example, the distribution of Title I and Title II funds, homeless/migrant services, bilingual services, and IDEA services are administered through the Department of Education for all students. Given the critical nature of these services, ACNJ believes there must be careful consideration of the practical consequences of dividing these funding streams, with input from local districts and the New Jersey Department of Education. Head Start. Given the important role that Head Start and Early Head Start play in the lives of many of New Jersey's young children, if a new department is created for children from birth through age 8, Head Start and related programs should be included in the proposed Department of Early Childhood.

Teacher licensing. ACNJ has long advocated for a more robust set of standards for the training of all teachers of children ages 0-8. Given New Jersey's current regulatory structure, teachers holding P-3 Early Childhood and K-6 Elementary certifications can teach young children through age 8. If a department is created, the P-3 teacher license should be moved to that department. Additionally given the potential for broad reorganization of the early childhood system, it would be timely to revisit the age/grade ranges of the teacher certifications to encourage both flexibility and specialization in the needs of children.

Department of Health

Lead Screening. Currently New Jersey lead screening programs cover all ages, but there is a clear focus on screening young children with elevated lead levels. Children under the age of six are particularly vulnerable to the damaging effects of lead because their central nervous systems are not fully developed and their bodies absorb and retain lead to a greater extent than do the bodies of adults. Given the focus on young children's lead levels, should lead screening programs directed at young children be shifted into the Department of Early Childhood?

Maternal care programs. New Jersey has implemented expanded postpartum depression screening and health initiatives to improve maternal and child outcomes such as the Maternal Child Health Consortia. These programs, although they may directly affect young children, are not mentioned in the bill language. Should maternal and child health programming be considered for inclusion in the new department?

Department of Human Services

Child Care Subsidy Programs – (New Jersey Cares for Kids (NJCK) and WorkFirst NJ) Both of these programs provide child care subsidies to families with children ages 0-13. Since these programs affect children within this age range, the practical consequences of changes to these funding streams must be considered. Input from the New Jersey Department of Human Services, Division of Family Development is critical.

S1455 – Full-Day Kindergarten

ACNJ supports S1455, which would require full-day kindergarten in all school districts and establish a uniform age requirement for kindergarten enrollment. Increasing evidence clearly shows the efficacy of full-day kindergarten for increasing students' cognitive learning and academic achievement.

ACNJ has long advocated for New Jersey to catch up to the 44 states that currently mandate that all children attend kindergarten. This view is bolstered by ACNJ's recent focus group conversations with Newark parents of young children. When asked why so many kindergarten students are chronically absent, parents felt that if the state did not see kindergarten as important enough to mandate, the need to send their children to school every day was not as important as when they are in higher grades. While approximately 80 percent of New Jersey districts already offer full-day kindergarten, this bill demonstrates the state's commitment to ensuring that all children have the greatest opportunity to acquire the skills necessary to achieve future academic success and sends a message to parents that this year is as important as their child's future grades.

S1456 – Wraparound

S1456 seeks to address the impact that reduced wraparound funding has had on community-based child care programs that provide state-funded preschool. ACNJ believes that expanding eligibility to families in those districts will ensure pushback from other districts providing preschool and their families because they will not have access to such a service. The bill also creates a different standard for families in other communities for child care vouchers. A potential funding solution for these community-based programs is for any supplemental appropriation from the General Fund be made to the Department of Education to support the full cost of the six-hour day of state-funded preschool.

We are excited for the package of bills and look forward to helping New Jersey take steps towards a stronger and more equitable early childhood system.

Thank you again for your leadership and commitment on issues that affect our young children.