

Indiana FSSA Secretary Dr. Jennifer Walthall's testimony

Senate Education and Career Development Committee

March 8, 2017

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. My name is Jennifer Walthall. I am Governor Holcomb's newly appointed Secretary of the Family and Social Services Administration and also a pediatric emergency physician for over 15 years and it is my honor to be here today to offer information to help you in your discussions of the future of early childhood education in our state.

During my pediatrics training, my fellow residents and I were inspired by the 1981 Panel for the Promotion of Child Health statement that "children are a third of our population and all of our future." It encouraged us to invest our time in delayed gratification items such as injury prevention, immunizations, physical activity and nutrition, and other associated intangibles, rather than always gravitating toward the more "exciting" parts of medical care. This sentiment rings true more broadly now in my work at FSSA and should propel us to think beyond the immediacy of problems that are presented to us in the moment. Instead, we should spend time and effort thinking about the "little futures" that are running around at our feet – without a voice or a wallet – to help us make good decisions.

Prekindergarten education falls into this realm. By boosting not only the physical health of our children, but also their capacity for learning and social interaction through quality early childhood education programming, we assert that prevention and promotion are important. The ramifications of this cannot be understated. Building a foundation for educational and social/emotional success is a key part in developing children into well-rounded adults.

National research clearly indicates that high-quality early educational experiences are important to the future success of children - in particular children who are growing up in poverty. For example, we know that:

- 90 percent of a child's brain development occurs before age 5 and this brain development is not solely based on genetic hardwiring. It also

depends on the child's environment and the responsiveness of parents, caregivers and teachers.

- Children in poverty face academic and social opportunity gaps including a lack of early exposure to language, reading and math.
- This cycle of poverty not only impacts individual children, it also negatively impacts society through increased costs for health care and other social services and a decrease in tax revenues.
- This achievement gap also negatively impacts the local workforce and economic development.
- The opportunity gap is lessened by providing high-quality early learning for children who live in disadvantaged environments. Children who start school well-prepared are much more likely to experience academic success.

The FSSA Office of Early Childhood and Out-of-School Learning (OECOSL) manages Indiana's five-county pilot "On My Way Pre-K" program for low-income children, and we have gained some very important feedback from the first full year of the program:

- We learned that children participating in On My Way Pre-K are some of the most educationally needy among Indiana children. They entered their programs in the fall with lower skill levels than their peers. Despite this early gap, children in On My Way Pre-K gained skills from fall to spring at a higher rate than their peers. These gains included several key aspects of school readiness: language comprehension, early literacy, executive functioning and a reduction in behavior problems in the classroom.
- More than half of the families surveyed told us that by knowing their children were in a safe learning environment through On My Way Pre-K, they had the confidence to increase their school or work hours. Additionally, many told us that obtained new employment or began school or job training. So not only is strong pre-kindergarten education great for children, it is also beneficial to the development of Indiana's workforce.

One of the benefits of doing this type of analysis is that we can quickly make improvements to our programs. For example, we found that our new programs are looking to improve their expertise in delivering not only a great social environment, but also a great education milieu. To this end, we are committed to ongoing quality improvement analysis of this program to make sure that we are setting the bar high and delivering great service to these kids and their families.

Beyond the pre-K pilot under discussion, in the last 12 months, Indiana's Early Care and Education (ECE) system has helped to place nearly 6,000 4-year-old children from low-income families in a high-quality educational environment. Indiana has defined high-quality as being rated a Level 3 or Level 4 in Indiana's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), "Paths to Quality." This has meant that an ECE classroom of 4-year-olds, in a level 3 or 4 program, would include children who were funded through various low-income programs but receiving the exact same instructional practices, care, and teaching as their counterparts whose families are paying full tuition. The funding for these 4-year-olds has come from the following sources:

- *Child Care Development Fund (CCDF): 3,913 children*
- *On My Way Pre-K (OMW): 1,585 children*
- *Early Education Matching Grant (EEMG): 403 children*

These ECE programs have been comprised of a mixture of state and federal funds, totaling over \$ 44 million annually, with the state portion of that total being more than \$17 million. It is important to remember that Indiana has always served a number of low-income children in high quality care in its ECE system. We support multiple avenues for education for low-income families in a sustainable way. These kids are able to thrive in integrated environments, sitting next to their peers of all backgrounds in any classroom in your hometown.

As we work together to enhance and expand our pre-K programming in Indiana, let's choose to focus on our future together. On behalf of the Governor, I am excited to work with the House and the Senate on how we will serve Hoosier children through this program.

I would be happy to entertain any questions. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

END TESTIMONY