



CONFRONTING THE QUIET CRISIS:  
How Chief State School Officers Are Advancing  
Quality Early Childhood Opportunities

## Table of Contents

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Introduction .....	2
Nancy Grasmick, Maryland .....	4
Sandy Garrett, Oklahoma .....	14
William Librera and Lucille Davy, New Jersey.....	23
Deborah Gist, Rhode Island.....	35
Brenda Cassellius, Minnesota .....	44
Lessons for Chiefs .....	53
Contributors.....	61

## Introduction

In 2009, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) adopted a new policy statement on early childhood education. Based on the work of a task force of 13 chiefs, *A Quiet Crisis: The Urgent Need to Build Early Childhood Systems and Quality Programs for Children Birth to Age Five* presents a compelling argument for why public education leaders should care about young children well before they enter kindergarten.

“A quiet crisis is threatening the future of America. Deeply rooted achievement gaps and shortfalls, and a lack of high-quality early learning opportunities compromise the potential of too many children. ”

The statement calls on chief state school officers to work with other state leaders and the early childhood community on a three-fold agenda: building coherent early childhood systems that address standards, assessment, data, professional development, and accountability; improving program quality in all forms of early care and education; and aligning and integrating early childhood and kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade schooling.

This follow-on report, *Confronting the Quiet Crisis: How Chief State School Officers Are Advancing Quality Early Childhood Opportunities*, is intended to help chiefs implement the recommendations made in *A*

*Quiet Crisis*. It addresses the pragmatic and strategic questions of chiefs who appreciate the contributions of strong early childhood programs, but are more than fully occupied with ambitious and challenging initiatives to improve the performance of elementary and secondary schools. How can they make the case for early childhood investments in today’s state budget context? How can they best lead on early childhood education when, in most states, responsibility for managing programs is spread between education, human service, and health agencies, and federally-managed Head Start and Early Head Start programs?

To address these questions, the Council launched the Early Childhood Leadership Development Project in 2010 to enhance the leadership capacity of chief state school officers to promote high-quality pre-k, kindergarten, and other early learning programs for children birth to age eight. With funding from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the project’s first step was to identify and document a range of examples where chiefs have been successful in raising awareness of the significance of the early childhood agenda, and in promoting tangible change in state policies and investments.

This report shows how chiefs in five states led efforts to expand and improve early learning opportunities. It begins with profiles of Nancy Grasmick in Maryland and Sandy Garrett in Oklahoma; both served as chief in

their state from 1991 to 2011. Their longevity, skill, and commitment to early childhood enabled them to lead a series of significant early childhood initiatives, ranging from expanding state investments to improving program quality to expanding partnerships with state agencies and private sector leaders.

Next, the report highlights the experiences of two successive chiefs, William Librera and Lucille Davy in New Jersey. They worked from 2002 to 2010 to implement the New Jersey Supreme Court order (*Abbott v Burke*) that mandated a new high-quality pre-k program for all low-income 3- and 4-year-olds in 31 school districts.

Finally, the report takes an in-depth look at two current chiefs, Deborah Gist appointed as chief in Rhode Island in 2009 and Brenda Cassellius appointed in Minnesota in 2011. Both have made rapid advances in creating interagency structures to coordinate early childhood policy and firmly situate early childhood in their state's overall plan for education reform.

Each state profile is based on interviews with the chiefs, other state leaders, advocates, and early childhood partners.

A concluding chapter highlights eight key leadership strategies gleaned from these diverse examples, as well as insights from CCSSO Executive Director Gene Wilhoit,

based on his work on early childhood issues as a chief in both Arkansas and Kentucky.

In adopting the 2009 early childhood policy statement, chief state school officers spoke loud and clear that they need to be in the business of early childhood. If states fail to confront the quiet crisis, too many children will start school unprepared and will fail to reach their fullest potential, limiting their life goals and compromising the strength of our society and economy. This report is intended to challenge, inspire, and inform all chiefs as they continue to take bold steps to enhance quality early learning opportunities for all children.





**Nancy Grasmick**  
**Maryland State Superintendent of Education**  
**1991-2011**

An educator through and through, Nancy Grasmick began her career teaching deaf children in Baltimore, Maryland. She moved on to positions as a resource teacher, principal, assistant superintendent, and associate superintendent in the Baltimore County Public Schools. In 1991, the Maryland State Board of Education appointed Grasmick state superintendent of schools where she served until retiring in 2011. As state superintendent, Grasmick worked with four governors and was known throughout the state as the “First Lady of Education.” From her first days as state superintendent through to her retirement, Grasmick worked with unprecedented devotion to ensure that children in Maryland have quality early learning opportunities that set them on a path to success in kindergarten and beyond.

“Nancy fully recognizes that education is the ticket to freedom. Your race, color, socioeconomic status doesn’t matter. If you have a good education, you will go places. That’s why she was so adamant to look at education from the pre-k through 12 lens, and even 0-18. She had her eye on the line of sight to take all little kids through to be well-educated adults. It’s no wonder why Maryland schools were ranked #1 in the nation three years in a row. Her tenacity, determination, and vision that all kids can achieve made this happen.” *Ben Carson, Director of the Department of Pediatric Neurosurgery, Johns Hopkins Hospital Children’s Center*

**Key Accomplishments in Early Childhood**

During her 20 years as state superintendent, Grasmick worked to build quality and equity across early childhood programs. Three significant achievements demonstrate her commitment to the early learning of Maryland children. First, her desire for every child to succeed led her to implement a nationally-recognized kindergarten assessment system to help teachers focus on how best to support the learning of each child and create a statewide picture for policymakers of the children’s skills as they entered kindergarten. Second, recognizing that learning begins before kindergarten entry, she advocated for a five-fold increase in state funding for quality

pre-k for economically challenged four-year-olds. And third, under her leadership, all state funded child care was consolidated within the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). In addition to these three major achievements, she took advantage of other opportunities to build capacity throughout the early learning community in the state.

**Building a Statewide Early Childhood Assessment System**

Motivated by a commitment to accountability in early childhood as well as public education, Grasmick set out in the 1990s to find an assessment system that would measure the school readiness of children and guide kindergarten teachers in planning for instruction. According to Rolf Grafwallner, assistant state

superintendent for early childhood development, “Nancy wanted a consistent state assessment census so that we could understand each child at the point of entry to kindergarten, build in accountability for what early childhood should

**Grasmick worked with unprecedented devotion to ensure that children in Maryland have quality early learning opportunities that set them on a path to success in kindergarten and beyond.**

work toward to ensure successful transition, and give kindergarten teachers guidance on what each child needs to be successful. It was of particular interest to her that this work for low-income and minority children and that children with disabilities were built into every aspect of the design. She saw assessment as a tool to help drive quality in early childhood practice.”

Following a review of available models, and an RFP process, MSDE selected the Work Sample System (WSS) in 1994 to serve as the universal assessment tool. The WSS is a portfolio-based system that enables teachers to observe, document, and evaluate children’s readiness and progress over time along 30 key indicators in 7 broad domains of child development and early learning. Grasmick was especially pleased with the WSS because it defined items in terms of objectives and learning indicators, and had articulation through to third grade. At the same time, the agency led a process to develop a school readiness definition, a position paper on assessment in the primary grades, and a set of primary outcomes and indicators for pre-k and kindergarten, with broad engagement of the early childhood community and public schools.

An initial two-year pilot to administer the WSS in five school districts revealed significant challenges and led the state to create a more comprehensive

initiative, the Maryland Model for School Readiness (MMSR). The MMSR linked assessment with curriculum, instructional strategies, family communication, and collaboration with early care and education providers. This expanded effort was implemented in 1997 in 11 of Maryland’s 24 school districts. Five full days of professional development were provided for kindergarten and pre-kindergarten teachers to support the effective implementation of MMSR, including the Work Sample System.

Grasmick’s intensive effort to build a statewide assessment effort positioned MSDE to respond in 1999 when the general assembly created a Joint Committee on Children Youth and Families, a consolidated children and youth budget, and a charge to state agencies to collaborate to document results in key priority areas. She worked

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behind the scenes to ensure that one of the priorities would be children entering school ready to learn. Building on MSDE’s earlier efforts, they created a customized, streamlined version of the WSS, and began reporting results annually for all children, and key subgroups, as well as data for each of Maryland’s school districts.

Grasmick’s leadership and focus on capacity building, helped early childhood professionals, teachers, principals, and superintendents understand the value in using the MMSR kindergarten assessment for generating data that would be useful for intervention, classroom

teaching, and discussions with families. County superintendents were supported in aligning local curricula with MMSR. Teachers began to see the value and utility of the portfolio approach to assessment, rather than a standard performance assessment. To support teachers, Grasmick built an intense and continuous professional development system so that there would be consistency in implementation of the WSS and provide an opportunity for sharing strategies for successful intervention.

Rather than holding data from the MMSR at the state level as had been the practice with earlier kindergarten assessments, Grasmick was committed to making sure the data were available

**“Because we had this data, people began to notice that kids with early experiences were coming more prepared for kindergarten and first grade. And as we look at the data over time, we are finding that each cohort is doing better than the previous cohort. It reaffirms our belief that what happens in the early years does impact school readiness.”**

and used to influence practice. MSDE developed a data management system and reporting protocols that provide information for analyzing data at the state, county, school, and individual student level. Using data from the fall collection period, annual reports were generated that describe the readiness profile of entering kindergarteners.

Grafwallner recalls, “It was the first year of data on school readiness. The data showed that only 4 of 10 kids were ready for school. Rather than it becoming a horror story, Nancy was able to help frame it as a point of opportunity that we’ve got to do something about this and use the data to drive smart investments that will advance school readiness.”

Since then, Grasmick comments, “Because we had this data, people began to notice that kids with early experiences were coming more prepared for kindergarten and first grade. And as we look at the data over time, we are finding that each cohort is doing better than the previous cohort. It reaffirms our belief that what happens in the early years does impact school readiness.”

MMSR assessment findings are used for strategic planning purposes, calling attention to interventions that need to be developed to support children with certain characteristics. This has resulted in changes both in early childhood programs and in kindergarten and early elementary grades. According to Carson, “Nancy was willing to look at minorities and see how they fared versus other groups and if things needed to be done differently to support them. She could do this because she was compiling the data and was committed to using it.”

Maryland has developed a successful model of an early childhood assessment system that supports multiple uses including informing instruction, reporting to parents, informing partnerships between early childhood and public schools, and contributing to a results-based accountability process.

### **Advancing Kindergarten and Pre-k Opportunities**

In 1992, the Maryland state legislature passed a law calling for all children to have a kindergarten experience before they enter first grade. The law did not dictate that kindergarten be operated solely by the public school system; instead, parents could choose to have their child in a nursery school or child care center as long as they could attest that they were enrolled in a full day program the year before entering first grade. While mandatory kindergarten was seen

as a breakthrough, Grasmick knew that waiting until age five was not good enough for many children in Maryland. Given this, she set out to work with the advocacy community and other key players in the state to plant the seed for pre-k initiatives with special attention to the needs of economically disadvantaged four-year-olds.

The door for publically financed pre-k opened with the report of the Thornton Commission on School Finance (2001-2002). At the time, Governor Glendening wanted to avert a legal case of inequitable funding so the Thornton Commission was established to review school finance formulas. Grasmick was not on the commission, but she strategically worked with colleagues who were to look at how the state could improve outcomes for students and support systems so everyone could achieve. The commission's report called on local school

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systems to provide pre-k for every economically disadvantaged four-year-old. The governor and state legislature accepted the recommendation and thus set in motion Maryland's pre-k effort to expand from \$20 million to over \$100 million. There was also a parallel effort for children with disabilities. “We saw many children with deprivation who had been through the Part C Infant/Toddler program and made sure that they could get folded into the pre-k effort too.” Staying true to her roots in special education and her commitment to early intervention, Grasmick continued, “We were seeing that with quality early intervention, fewer children were entering school needing special education programs so it

made sense to give them a quality pre-k experience too.”

## **Consolidating all Child Care into the Maryland State Department of Education**

With mandatory full-day kindergarten and 4-year-old pre-k for economically disadvantaged children as well as the kindergarten readiness assessments underway, the potential for creating a cohesive early childhood education system linked to elementary and secondary learning was near at hand. “We were close but needed the systems and structures to bring it all together in a way that would create real cohesion, quality, and capacity,” said Grasmick.

“Nancy worked with several of us in the state legislature to make sure we understood the value of transferring child care from the Department of Human Services to the Department of Education,” said former State Senator Barbara Hoffman. And she worked with the child care and family support community to build support for the move. Grasmick was careful to ensure that they understood that while subsidized child care would come under the aegis of MSDE, this did not mean it would become the responsibility of the public schools. She supported child care continuing as a largely private system, but MSDE would offer training, support, and professional development to all early childhood providers as a way of enhancing overall quality and capacity.

In 2005, the Maryland Assembly passed a bill to transfer child care licensing and child care quality initiatives from the Department of Human Resources to MSDE. In 2006, Governor Ehrlich issued an executive order making the transfer complete by transferring all funding and policy decisions of the child care subsidy program to MSDE as well. “It was Nancy's credibility, calm, sweet manner, reason, good



relations with a wide variety of stakeholders, and steadfast focus on what's good for kids that won the day," said Margaret Williams, executive director of the Maryland Family Network.

"Not every leader would be out there at 8:30 pm on a cold February day with child care providers and workers holding a placard that said, 'Child care is early learning.' She wasn't at the podium, but mingled with the crowd as she waited for the governor to make his announcement of the child

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care subsidy transfer," said Grafwallner. With this, Grasmick launched the Division of Early Childhood Development. "The division made all the difference in the world. It enabled us to bring together all early learning entities into a cohesive group. We were able to look at quality of providers and content of programs, and we were able to create clear articulation paths across programs. We were also able to provide professional development and technical assistance to the field to enhance consistency and quality. It became a moment of truth that early care and education was critical," said Grasmick.

"It rocked the department. Early childhood had been underrepresented, but once consolidated in one place, that was no longer the case," said Grafwallner. "It was the best thing that ever

happened for child care in Maryland," said Linda Zang of the Maryland Head Start State Collaboration Office. According to Grasmick, "Up until this point, we were taking lots of baby steps, but then with this transfer, we took a big step. We were finally able to make clear links between early learning and grade three."

## Capitalizing on Other Opportunities

Grasmick was skillful in capitalizing on other opportunities to advance her commitment to early child development. Her work on special education, her collaboration with Johns Hopkins University, and her role in the development of the Judy Center Partnerships stand out as important examples.

**Early Intervention.** With her commitment to young children with special needs and an appreciation for the whole child approach, Grasmick looked for opportunities to enhance early intervention programs. Just because a child had a physical or learning disability didn't mean that expectations should be different. As one observer noted, "Nancy was adamant that schools should never use disability as an excuse for a child not achieving." From 1990 through 1997, Grasmick worked with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, the Department of Human Resources, and the other child-serving agencies to develop and implement a statewide system of early intervention services for young children with developmental disabilities and their families. With this partnership, Part C started to take off in Maryland and an intense focus on early intervention was created.

**Linkages Between Neuroscience and Early Learning.** Along with the whole child focus, Grasmick was determined to understand the linkages between neuroscience and early learning. She developed a partnership with

Johns Hopkins School of Education and the Zanvyl Krieger Mind/Brain Institute to look at specific challenges confronting the field. In particular, Grasmick was interested in understanding the links between language development and early reading and what should happen differently in programs and classrooms to support learning. Johns Hopkins became a trusted resource and partner and provided a forum where Grasmick could turn to explore issues that she knew needed to be better understood to achieve effective practice.

**Judy Center Partnerships.** Grasmick and Judy Hoyer — wife of Congressman Steny Hoyer — were classmates in college. Judy was a real advocate for early learning and understood the importance of supporting the comprehensive needs of families. Judy was concerned that all too often parents are case coordinators for their children/family. Instead, she thought families would benefit if social services, health, job training, and services for children were all in one easy-to-access location.

When Judy passed away, her husband wanted to memorialize her and, accompanied by Governor Glendening and State Delegate Mark Shriver, he lobbied the legislature to pass legislation and provide \$20 million to create the Judith P. Hoyer Early Child Care and Education Enhancement Program. Congressman Hoyer knew that Grasmick would ably implement this vision and insisted that the Judy Center Partnerships fall under the auspice of the MSDE rather than the governor's Office for Children, Youth and Families. "This gave elementary schools in high need areas the capacity to connect with early childhood providers and work together to support school readiness and family well-being," said Williams. There are now 25 Judy Center Partnerships, impacting

40 Title 1 elementary schools, linking public schools to early childhood programs and the array of comprehensive support services frequently needed by families facing adversity.

Grasmick's skillful leadership, ability to seize on a variety of strategic opportunities, and capacity to work with governors, legislators, and leaders from academia, the private sector, and the education and early childhood communities have generated an impressive legacy of accomplishments. Maryland created an innovative statewide early childhood assessment system, dramatically increased access to high quality pre-k and kindergarten programs, and expanded the responsibilities of MSDE to include management of child care services, as well as state pre-k and early childhood special education programs. At the same time, she enhanced her agency's internal capacity in early childhood, establishing a Division of Early Childhood Development.

These achievements complemented each other and contributed to accelerated momentum and heightened visibility for her early childhood agenda. Reports from the state assessment effort have shown increased numbers of children deemed fully ready for kindergarten, bolstering the case for continued state investment. Increased funding allowed Maryland to mount professional development and program improvement initiatives in areas of weakness revealed by the child assessment and other program quality data. Bringing all key state early care and education programs into MSDE highlights their shared responsibility for providing high-quality learning opportunities and support for families with young children. Moreover, these accomplishments positioned Maryland to receive a \$50 million award in the recent Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant competition.

## Leadership Strategies

Grasmick was successful in part due to a set of values and traits that established her in the eyes of colleagues, politicians, and the general public as someone genuinely committed to education and realizing success for every child. According to Carol Ann Heath-Baglin, recently retired assistant state superintendent of the Division of Special Education/Early Intervention Services, “Most people don’t have her mix of knowledge, dedication, leadership, passion, personal charm, political skills, and know-how to get things done.”

**Grasmick linked everything back to early childhood development and success for every child.** She understood child development and believed all children had potential. She also understood how the family and community environments influence children’s well-being and ability to learn. “She reiterated and reiterated that quality early childhood experiences would yield better outcomes – that the early years were the stepping stones for school success. She pushed us towards more prevention and early intervention,” said Louise Corwin, executive director of Ready At Five. But that did not mean that she thought early childhood centers should look like kindergarten classrooms. Child care advocates appreciated that Grasmick had developmentally appropriate expectations for early learning, and that she had a track record for demanding good outcomes for all children.

**Grasmick used research and data to influence policy and practice.** She had an innate curiosity in how the brain works and a drive for evidence-based answers. “I began to explore neuroscience research and became more and more convinced that the most critical points for learning precede six years of age.

I was also curious about looking at inhibitors to school achievement. One of the biggest inhibitors was early language development, which later translates into reading. I thought ‘gosh, if we could do things in early learning to change the trajectory, we will likely see better outcomes for students,’” said Grasmick.

Grasmick was also influenced by research on how children living in poverty are exposed to factors such as chronic stress, which impacts emotional regulation, executive function, and learning. “Understanding the research on the effects of chronic stress for children in poverty propelled Nancy. She knew that it could and should be addressed,” said Mariale Hardiman of Johns Hopkins University.

She understood the research and was committed to act, but she also knew she needed to bring others along with her. A real thought leader, she engaged all those around her in conversations about research and helped all to ground policy and practice in what they were learning. “She was loved by the state legislature because she gave them lots of information, whether it was research on brain development or data on how well we

**“Nancy wants loads of empirical data — then she wants to sit in a room with her staff and other experts to study that data — then she wants to use that data to implement changes — then she wants to measure to see what happens. EVERYTHING is grounded in data — not off-the-cuff ideas that sound good.”**

were doing educating our children. She was honest, trustworthy, and genuine. And she was always trying to figure out how to make the education system better,” said Hoffman. On working with the governors, Grasmick said, “It wasn’t a hard sell. Some governors were more

aggressive than others, but they were all believers in the importance of early learning. And then when we shared our outcomes, the data reinforced the mindset that early learning was a great investment.”

“Nancy wants loads of empirical data — then she wants to sit in a room with her staff and other experts to study that data — then she wants to use that data to implement changes — then she wants to measure to see what happens. EVERYTHING is grounded in data — not off-the-cuff ideas that sound good,” said Carson.

**Grasmick was committed to professional development and mentoring.** She valued early childhood providers and wanted to make sure they felt appreciated for the role they play in the learning of young children. Grasmick was committed to uplifting their view of themselves and their skills with professional development, mentoring, defining career pathways, and providing opportunities to degree programs. “She felt that the child care community needed the same attention and investment in professional

**“She felt that the child care community needed the same attention and investment in professional development as school staff. She wanted providers to be able to say and believe that they are professionals, not just babysitters.”**

development as school staff. She wanted providers to be able to say and believe that they are professionals, not just babysitters. She **always** took time at meetings to thank providers for loving the children in their care and helping them become ready for school,” said Corwin.

In addition to focusing on the professional development of those providing direct care to young children, in the early 2000s, Grasmick

worked with the Annie E. Casey Foundation to create a program to enhance the skills and practices of mid-level managers working in early childhood. The original program brought a cohort together for 18 months to share, learn, grow, and apply their learnings back to their work environment. The Leadership in Action program (LAP) has now been replicated in other parts of the country. Interestingly, the first cohort still works together and transformed into the state’s Early Childhood Advisory Council which took an oversight role in Maryland’s successful proposal for the Early Learning Challenge grant competition.

**Grasmick built partnerships with the business community.** Grasmick understood the value of engaging the business community and helping them realize the importance of early learning. She approached the business community much like she did policymakers, sharing research on brain development and data on student outcomes. Ready At Five, the early childhood arm of the Maryland Business Roundtable, became a key resource to MSDE. With funding from the Pew Charitable Trusts, Ready At Five held a school readiness summit that attracted business leaders throughout Maryland. “There were many ah-ha comments from those in attendance as they listened to Nancy and came to realize that, yes, learning begins before children enter kindergarten,” said Corwin. This spawned numerous networking breakfasts attended by business leaders, members of the chamber, and Grasmick. As a result, there are several foundations that have added early childhood as a priority area for investment.

**Grasmick skillfully listened and built consensus.** Some attribute her careful listening to her early work with deaf children; others consider it simply a part of who she is and

the respect that she has for all people and their ideas. Regardless, nearly all of those interviewed spoke of her genuine eagerness to engage with all people regardless of their position or viewpoint. They also noted that she was a problem solver and consensus builder. “She would engage folks, listen carefully, and then problem solve. She was able to reinvent her ideas to accommodate other positions and still keep things true to her central belief of success for every child. In the process, she would be building a stakeholder group that would feel they have a voice and would become part of the solution,” said Heath-Baglin. “It was an important part of her leadership strategy — bring people in and listen to them,” said Zang. People of all viewpoints felt understood, included, and valued. “This is part of what made her so effective. She could be out front as a champion and also behind the scenes working to build understanding and consensus,” said Grafwallner.

*Grasmick exuded a warm, personable, and trustworthy leadership style.* As her long-term key early childhood manager, Grafwallner notes, “Nancy had a ‘deep sensing’ leadership style. She was constantly going out to find out what her line staff were doing and how much in tune they were with her overall mission. She valued and recognized the contributions of all, and she makes it clear it’s a team effort. She stands with her staff so that together, as a team, they bask in the glory.” She cared about what was concerning people — from a staff person who

had a family member with medical challenges, to a parent who was having difficulty securing an appropriate IEP for their child — and used her connections to do everything in her power to meet such individual needs. “She took time to build relationships with people and had an uncanny ability to remember faces, names, and connections to your work or interests,” said Hardiman. And she demonstrated a shared commitment to working in partnership with all — parents, providers, advocates, policymakers, and her own staff in the department — rolling up her sleeves to join in addressing challenges and sharing in the collective joy of success.

## Lessons for Other States

So what can Grasmick’s experience in Maryland teach other chiefs?

1. **Creating a readiness assessment and buttressing it with real professional development and support** for early childhood providers as well as early elementary teachers should be an important priority. Focusing on data enables chiefs to build the case for what is needed.
2. **Consolidating all early childhood programs within the Department of Education** results in better consistency in services and articulation from early learning through elementary education, and opportunities to enhance quality across programs.

### A Final Word

“For 15 years, I’ve been saying if I were Queen for a Day, I would terminate the senior year of high school and put the money into early learning. Working on early childhood education has been one of the highlights of my tenure as state superintendent.” Nancy Grasmick



## Key Dates

1992	State legislature passed legislation requiring full-day kindergarten.
1994	Department selected Work Sampling System (WSS) as a universal readiness assessment tool to see where kids are at the point of entry to kindergarten and to build in accountability and articulation.
1997	Maryland Model for School Readiness (MMSR) was launched and focused on professional development and aligning local curricula with the kindergarten assessment.
1999	General Assembly created a Joint Committee on Children, Youth and Families to develop a children and youth budget.
1999-2002	The Commission on Education, Finance, Equity and Excellence (the Thornton Commission) called for pre-k for every economically disadvantaged four-year-old.
2000	Judith P. Hoyer Early Child Care and Education Enhancement Program was established to provide comprehensive services for at-risk children 0-5 and their families.
2002	Bridge to Excellence School Act became law reforming school financing to focus on adequacy and equity including kindergarten for all and pre-k for economically disadvantaged 4-year-olds.
2005	Governor Ehrlich's executive order transferred the former Child Care Administration from the Department of Human Resources to MSDE.
2005	Division of Early Child Development in MSDE was launched to address needs of the child care community and make links between early learning and grade 3.
2011	Pilot QRIS launched to recognize child care providers and centers for their accomplishments.



**Sandy Garrett**  
**Oklahoma Superintendent of Public Instruction**  
**1991-2011**

From the classroom to the boardroom, Sandy Garrett wore numerous hats during her career in education. First, she spent 13 years teaching 6-year-olds in her hometown of Muskogee, Oklahoma. Even though home visiting was not the norm at the time, Garrett conducted home visits to better understand the strengths and needs of her students and their families. After teaching, she became the gifted programs coordinator in Muskogee County schools and then the gifted and talented programs coordinator for the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE). She later became the department’s executive director of education programs where she was able to focus on rural education, technology, and media. Then, beginning in 1991, she was elected for five consecutive four-year terms as Oklahoma’s superintendent of public instruction. In addition, in 1998, Garrett was named cabinet secretary of education by republican Governor Henry Bellmon. She stayed in this position when democrat David Walters became governor. During her watch, Oklahoma became the first state in the nation to offer universal pre-k. With more than 70 percent of children participating in the state-funded program, Oklahoma is seeing positive results in education outcomes for children.

“The education community followed Sandy like she was the pied piper, especially teachers because she was a former teacher.” *Ramona Paul, Former Assistant State Superintendent of Schools*

**Key Accomplishments in Early Childhood**

During her 20-year tenure, Garrett was a consistent voice for promoting early childhood as a key element in improving education in Oklahoma. Working with a broad spectrum of other leaders, she helped Oklahoma make tremendous progress in expanding opportunities for young children to grow, learn, and thrive. For example, pre-k was woven into the state’s school funding formula and standards for quality were set high -- including teachers with BA degrees and early childhood certification, and small class sizes. In addition, Oklahoma’s Reaching for the Stars initiative was the nation’s first quality rating system designed to uplift the quality of child care. Garrett worked with the business and

philanthropic communities to create a host of other innovative early childhood efforts.

**Expanding Pre-K through the School Funding Formula**

Oklahoma’s current universal pre-k program was based on a small pilot effort begun in the early 1980s in 10 school districts. The effort was led by Ramona Paul, a former school administrator with a Ph.D. in early childhood and deep experience as a university faculty member and leader in Head Start training efforts. She recalls, “One day, Superintendent Leslie Fisher came into my office and wanted to know what I would like to do for children under age five. He told me to write the model and that he would go to the legislature and get it funded. So I took what I knew from the research and my experience and proposed a pilot pre-k program

that would have children in a classroom four days a week with the fifth day for teachers to conduct home visits and parent education.”

The pilot — funded through a line item in the state budget — was open to families of all income levels on a first come, first served basis. It was wildly successful. “Parents were lining up at 3 a.m. to get their children in,” said Garrett. Programs were started in small pockets of districts and communities. Superintendents who shied away from the pilot the first year wanted to be part of the game in subsequent years, especially because they saw families moving out of their areas to neighboring districts with the pilot. Garrett and Paul consistently nurtured interest in early childhood among school district leaders and board members. For example, a session on early childhood was always part of the summer leadership conference for superintendents so they were familiar with what pre-k was about and what it would mean for

**The pilot...was wildly successful.  
“Parents were lining up at 3 a.m. to get their children in.”**

their district. Additional programs for at-risk children were funded beginning in 1990 as a result of an education reform task force appointed by Governor Bellmon. At the same time, the legislature also passed a law calling for mandatory attendance for half-day kindergarten, as well as expanding full-day kindergarten for parents who chose that option.

By 1998, many in the state were ready to take a next step to expand access to pre-k. Joe Eddins, a state legislator and former educator, took the lead over a two-year period to convince his colleagues to secure funding for pre-k within the school funding formula. Switching from a line item budget appropriation to a core

element in the overall funding formula made pre-k less vulnerable to cuts and assured schools they would get reimbursed for the services provided. “It also became a top goal of the School Boards Association,” said Kay Floyd, a lobbyist at the time for the Oklahoma State School Boards Association and now director of the Head Start State Collaboration Office.

Some were concerned that adding pre-k would dilute the pool of money for other students. But this was also a time when public school enrollment was diminishing and the schools had space to house pre-k and kindergarten classes. For superintendents, the fiscal payoff to enroll more kids and receive state reimbursement was a motivating factor for supporting the inclusion of 4-year-olds. “It was an amazing thing in terms of how fast programs were set up. I recall a meeting with the school districts, Head Start, child care, and church-based preschools in June. The first stories were in the newspaper in July. And in August, children were being enrolled,” said Eddins. In fact, the formula change allowed the state to jump from serving roughly 10,000 children in 1997 to more than 37,000 in 2009. Over the same time span, enrollment of students in full-day kindergarten also expanded steadily from roughly 23 percent to more than 90 percent.

“I’m more proud of our early childhood program than anything that I’ve done in my career. And I think that our board would say the same thing in terms of our early childhood investments,” said Lloyd Snow, superintendent of the Sand Springs District. Snow has a state-of-the-art early childhood facility that adjoins an elementary school. He has a total of 20 classrooms; 12 for children birth through 3-years-old; and 8 classes for 4-year-olds. “This is still a new initiative, and we don’t have as much capacity

to document as I would like, but you hear lots of positive feedback from kindergarten and first grade teachers,” said Snow.

Throughout the process, Garrett and Paul engaged the larger early childhood community in the pre-k effort, and took steps to ensure that school districts, child care, and Head Start would work together as part of universal pre-k. Child care and Head Start agencies were concerned about losing 4-year-olds to the public schools. Recognizing this concern, legislators crafted a provision allowing local education agencies (LEAs) to contract with private child care provided they uphold the same quality standards as the schools. Another provision prohibited LEAs from evicting Head Start programs if they had already been using school classrooms. Eva Carter, former Head Start State Collaboration Office director, credits Garrett and Paul with reaching out to engage

**“It’s because of the funding formula that we can claim #1 status in the nation in our percent of children served, even though we are one of the poorest states in the country.”**

child care and Head Start leaders. “We were at the table, knew what was going on, and this helped to lessen friction between early childhood and the schools that might arise.” Following the passage of the law, Garrett and Paul convened meetings with superintendents to promote pre-k partnerships, including highlighting models of collaboration with early childhood providers. Carter also recalls, “Sandy and Ramona never missed an opportunity to remind superintendents and principals of the opportunity to partner with child care and Head Start.” Over time these efforts paid off in the form of partnerships in 38 percent of all school districts, serving nearly 20 percent of the total

pre-k enrollment in child care and Head Start programs in 2009.

In sum, “Pre-k is now just another grade in elementary schools and the funding is built into the formula. It’s a very smart approach,” said Floyd. “It’s because of the funding formula that we can claim #1 status in the nation in our percent of children served, even though we are one of the poorest states in the country,” said Garrett.

### Creating Quality Aspects of Pre-K and Child Care

Quality was at the forefront of Oklahoma’s early childhood efforts during Garrett’s era. Together Garrett and Paul made sure that efforts to grow pre-k and child care were not just focused on increasing the numbers of children served; even more important to them was making sure that the early learning programs provided quality learning environments to ensure children would be ready for kindergarten.

**Quality efforts within pre-k.** From the beginning of the pre-k pilot program, Oklahoma called for high standards including teachers with a BA degree and training in early education, small group and classroom sizes (10 students per teacher, and a maximum of 20 children and a teacher and teacher assistant in a classroom), professional development, and pay for pre-k teachers equivalent to others who teach in the public schools. Importantly, the pilot was created on a unit basis, so the cost of the teacher and teacher assistant, equipment, space, and supplies were all wrapped into the total cost. According to Paul, “So if someone wanted to cut the funding, you had to cut a classroom, not an aspect of program quality. This made it simple and concrete for the legislators. For x dollars, you could fund y classrooms. If you cut x, then

you cut the number of classrooms that will be funded.” Then when the pre-k pilot program became embedded into the formula grant, the standards automatically transferred to the larger pre-k effort. The only change was that the model shifted to a 5-day program, not the original 4-day program plus a 5<sup>th</sup> day for home visits.

As child care and Head Start programs began to partner with school districts, the pre-k quality standards provided a way to upgrade teacher training and qualification. It meant that early learning teachers were treated as professionals, made a respectable salary, and qualified for the same benefits and retirement as all public school teachers. “Ramona was always concerned with the low status of a largely-female workforce and equity issues including salaries, fringe benefits, and retirement. So she would emphasize that she wanted them to be public school teachers, but that they were sometimes working in a different setting,” said Nancy von Barga,

**...early learning teachers were treated as professionals, made a respectable salary, and qualified for the same benefits and retirement as all public school teachers.**

former child care administrator in the Oklahoma Department of Human Services. The pre-k quality standards, along with parallel federal mandates to upgrade the credentials of teachers in Head Start, provided impetus for Head Start teachers to go back to school to get their BAs. “This is why Head Start programs in Oklahoma are far ahead of the national average in terms of percent of degreed teachers,” said Floyd. Garrett also used her influence to build capacity in higher education institutions to prepare early childhood teachers. “The state superintendent is also a regent so I could talk directly to the college presidents about the need to set up

early childhood teacher education programs,” said Garrett.

The focus on quality paid off. An independent evaluation of Oklahoma’s pre-k program in the Tulsa School District by William Gormley of Georgetown University showed all children experienced substantial gains as a result of their enrollment in the pre-k program, regardless of ethnicity or family income. Further, the research showed that the gains were the biggest for minority and low-income children. “His research reinforced the importance and value of the model. When teachers are well educated, have specialized training, and are paid a public school salary, children experience greater gains in learning than in typical programs,” said Paul. These positive findings were corroborated by another evaluation of the state pre-k program by the National Institute of Early Education Research.

**Quality efforts within child care.** Within child care, an emphasis on quality drives excellence as well. From licensing to monitoring to a first-in-the-nation quality rating improvement system (QRIS), Oklahoma was leading the way. “It’s little recognized that Oklahoma has one of the best licensing programs in the country,” said Bob Harbison a retired oil company executive turned early childhood advocate. “We are the strongest in the country in monitoring; we initially did four then three unannounced inspections per year. Plus we’re willing to take action if programs are unwilling to keep children safe,” said von Barga.

“1998 was a very good year; not only did we get pre-k in the school funding formula, but the Department of Human Services launched our QRIS,” said Harbison. Von Barga recalls that the impetus for developing Reaching for the Stars (the QRIS) came about after Senator Ben Brown



proclaimed, “I’m not willing to pay more for mediocre care.” At the time, there were no other statewide QRIS models so it was up to Oklahoma to chart the way. “QRIS was a vehicle for us to say what quality looks like,” said von Barga. Two issues were of top importance to those involved in the development of the Reaching for the Stars program; first, child care reimbursement should be tied to quality; and second, higher reimbursement rates were needed overall. This opened the door for the community to discuss

**“QRIS was a vehicle for us to say this is what quality looks like.”**

and define quality and the importance of appropriate measures, data for tracking outcomes, and public awareness. It also created an initiative that led the state to transfer savings from welfare reform to expand investments in child care. “Over time we were successful in raising reimbursement rates based on quality, expanding eligibility, and reducing copayment rates for families with multiple children in care. So we were improving the market for providers both by expanding the pool of eligible families in the child care subsidy system by close to 25 percent and increasing rates of reimbursement for quality care,” said Harbison.

Also in 1998, the Oklahoma Department of Human Services created the First Start program that added up to \$5,000 per child to three-star child care centers if the centers committed to seeking National Association for the Education of Young Children accreditation within 24 months. “It was an attempt to make them Early Head Start look-alikes,” said Harbison. “They were to use the funds to provide comprehensive services, improve the quality of staff, and even to follow the governance policies of

Head Start.” The program was eventually cut out of the budget, but it demonstrated yet another forward-thinking effort to enhance the quality of child care programs in Oklahoma.

### Supporting Public/Private Initiatives

In addition to public investment in pre-k and child care, Oklahoma enjoys both a public and financial commitment from the business community. From governors who have worked to forge partnerships with businesses, to local foundations and individual philanthropists, many relationships have evolved to make it possible to uplift early childhood services in the state.

Governor Keating wanted education to be part of his legacy, so in 2000 he issued an executive order that established a task force on early childhood. The task force included business leaders and public partners, though “it was the small group of business leaders who adopted the cause, recruited their friends, and had the political clout to gain support. Credit goes to them,” said von Barga. The task force came to be known as Smart Start and focused on early childhood public awareness, advocacy, and policy analysis. In 2002, Governor Henry used the task force work as the basis for legislation to create the Oklahoma Partnership for School Readiness, made up of public agency leadership, representatives of the private sector, and other citizens appointed by the governor. They also function as the State Early Childhood Advisory Council and have a 501(c)(3) foundation to raise money from other sources. Major priorities include improving and coordinating data and professional development across agencies and programs, and developing a school readiness assessment initiative. They have also developed a series of 19 local community partner entities.

George Kaiser, a wealthy philanthropist with a passion for helping poor children, partnered with others in early childhood, neuroscience, and related fields to find a way to make Tulsa a model city for young children. Influenced by the work of Warren Buffett's daughter Susie who has helped to develop Educare (a lighthouse model of comprehensive birth-to-five services), Kaiser invested in the first Educare program in Tulsa. Further, he went to the state legislature and offered matching funding to create a pilot program that would provide quality care for children birth through three from low-income families. This funding was appropriated to OSDE and their quality standards were applied, including a mandate for teachers with BA degrees, and funding to support commensurate teacher compensation. However, Garrett and Paul chose to use an external partner, a Head Start grantee in Tulsa, to manage the program — another example of their creative partnership mentality. Kaiser also is underwriting teacher education programs as a means for increasing quality.

Beyond Kaiser, other individuals and foundations have invested in Educare and other early learning efforts. For example, the Potts Family Foundation and the Inasmuch Foundation have invested in increasing awareness within the corporate community about the importance of development in the early years and the economic benefit of investing in early childhood.

Alongside these private initiatives, the Department of Education and other agencies supported varied program models in addition to core efforts in pre-k and child care. Parents As Teachers programs were introduced in 1990 in a number of public schools and public housing developments. Other pilot

efforts include a Nurse Family Partnership initiative and Sooner Start, the state's early intervention program, aimed at supporting parents of infants and toddlers. Oklahoma also provides more than \$2 million in state funds to Head Start programs for extended day and quality enhancement purposes.

Finally, in a few communities, other partners jumped on the pre-k bandwagon, including

**She found her rhythm by working in tandem with other public and private sector leaders and supporting a range of initiatives and investments beyond the boundaries of her own agency. She surrounded herself with experts in early childhood, built on earlier efforts, developed relationships with state policymakers as well as early childhood providers, and found ways to move forward with change that could be palatable to all.**

churches, insurance companies, retirement homes, and a museum. Since pre-k programs do not have to be housed in a public school, it opens the door for creative public/private partnerships. "Sponsors of pre-k sites are finding real enjoyment and benefit from the partnership. Church elders say it was the best decision ever, and retirement home directors are finding social/emotional value for their residents as they observe and interact with the children in the on-site pre-k program," said Paul.

## Leadership Strategies

Garrett worked to advance early childhood in Oklahoma through a strategy that can be best characterized as *shared leadership*. She was politically savvy and knew how to use her position to garner support for change that would help Oklahoma's young children shine.

However, she found her rhythm by working in tandem with other public and private sector leaders and supporting a range of initiatives and investments beyond the boundaries of her own agency. She surrounded herself with experts in early childhood, built on earlier efforts, developed relationships with state policymakers as well as early childhood providers, and found ways to move forward with change that could be palatable to all.

**Garrett built a strong partnership with her agency's early childhood expert.** Garrett's success in advancing early childhood issues over two decades were viewed as a team effort, based on her strong working relationship with

**"It truly was a tremendous set of leaders. People stayed in place over a long period which allowed the state to make much more progress."**

Ramona Paul. It helped that Sandy and Ramona shared a mutual respect for each other. "We just meshed. I had the substantive expertise and Sandy had the political clout and leadership needed to keep our early childhood efforts moving ahead with the legislature. She knew I would not bring up an idea that didn't make sense or that would be a political disaster," said Paul. "The two of them were seen as dynamic women who got things accomplished," said Carter. Garrett adds, "I was able to build a team of experts around me that I could trust and who could trust each other. We would 'cuss and discuss' issues and I was confident that at the end of the day they could speak for me with legislators." Paul adds, "None of our progress would have been possible without continuity. Over time, Sandy built trust and credibility among staff and within early childhood." Carter affirms, "It truly was a tremendous set of

leaders. People stayed in place over a long period which allowed the state to make much more progress."

**Garrett built relationships with key leaders in the state.** Along with participating in and leading varied cross-agency and public-private committees and task forces, Garrett and Paul facilitated off-the-record exchanges with other leaders and groups. "We used to call all the key leaders and have informal lunches. They were so productive in terms of coming up with initiatives that were often low-cost or no-cost. One year we came up with a campaign to make sure every child had a library card," said Garrett. A seasoned politician, she realized that in formal meetings, people were wearing their agency hats, so the opportunity for genuine sharing and brainstorming was limited. Further, in some instances, top leaders didn't attend formal meetings. Garrett and Paul knew it was key to work with people in small groups and build relationships with their counterparts in other departments.

**Garrett worked to minimize the impact of those who opposed pre-k and kindergarten.** Together, Garrett and Paul knew just how to strike just the right balance to prevent riling the opposition. Garrett's political instincts and Paul's content expertise helped them know when they could compromise and when they needed to hold the line. For example, they knew there might be pushback among a small group of parents if there was a mandate for full-day kindergarten. Rather than go that route, they worked with the legislature to instead enable LEAs to offer full-day programs, but mandated for half-day only. The reality is that even without the mandate, a very high percent of families are choosing to send their children to full-day kindergarten;

but they have the flexibility to choose half-day if they wish. Said Floyd, “Ramona understood when not to compromise.”

Similarly, Garrett employed a slow and steady approach to expanding access to pre-k. “We didn’t do an aggressive push for a broad initiative. Pre-k programs were started in small pockets of districts and communities, said Garrett. “Once the genie was out of the bottle, parents would seek out affordable and convenient pre-k,” said Steven Dow, Tulsa, Oklahoma Head Start director. By contrast, when Governor Henry tried to expand pre-k to 3-year-olds, the effort fell flat in the legislature as it was framed by opponents as a radical reform, sparking an uprising of conservative groups and ultimately a failed bill.

“We had a considerable battle in 1994 to hold onto our early childhood efforts. A very conservative candidate ran against me twice. She used her campaign to oppose what she termed the ‘nanny state,’ even opposing

**“Sandy and Ramona always reminded us that the children are not child care or Head Start or pre-k children; they are all our children.”**

kindergarten. Fortunately, Governor Keating didn’t go along with her. We had to do a lot of talking and education with legislators so that they understood the benefits of the pre-k and kindergarten programs,” said Garrett.

**Garrett and Paul partnered with the broader early childhood community and looped in superintendents and principals too.** Paul came to her position with a rich background in early childhood so she knew the players, knew the content, and knew just how to get things done. She made sure that they created an inclusive

process to engage the key players in the thinking, planning, and implementation of their early childhood effort. “Sandy and Ramona always reminded us that the children are not child care or Head Start or pre-k children; they are all our children,” said von Bargen. And because of this, Garrett expected all to be players. “We brought the larger community in from the beginning and they helped develop the rules,” said Paul. They also provided multiple opportunities for the superintendents and principals to grow comfortable with their role in getting children ready for school. Carter adds, “Sandy and Ramona didn’t just tell school leadership that they needed to be involved, they provided regular training and support to build their capacity.”

## Lessons for Other States

So what can Garrett’s experience in Oklahoma teach other chiefs?

1. **Be a relentless champion for program quality.** We know the ingredients for quality early learning programs and the power that quality has in creating strong outcomes for children. So, set high standards for programs and teachers from the get-go. Set funding rates that enable programs to meet high standards. Don’t make quality an add-on or an aspirational goal for the future.
2. **Incorporating funding for pre-k into the school finance formula** is essential for providing stable, predictable support for programs and teachers. It also helps to establish the understanding that learning begins before kindergarten and there must be clear articulation between learning in the early years and elementary education.
3. **Work with and through other leaders to advance your state’s early childhood**

**agenda.** Building a broad coalition of public and private sector leaders will uplift the visibility of early childhood, accelerate

momentum for investments in direct services, and build a support system to improve programs and child outcomes.

## A Final Word

“You build a climate of trust when you work together with other early childhood groups over the years. Then you seize political opportunities when they become available.” Sandy Garrett

## Key Dates

1980s	Early childhood 4-year-old program in place; it is a pilot pre-k program in 10 school districts.
1990	State law mandated attendance in half-day kindergarten for all age eligible 5-year olds.
1990	Legislature expanded the pilot pre-k program to provide funding for all 4-year-olds from families below the federal poverty income level and a sliding scale for higher income families.
1998	Pre-k was added to the school funding formula to cover all children, regardless of income.
1998	The Reaching for the Stars quality rating and improvement system was launched.
1998	The First Start program added resources to 3-star child care programs to provide comprehensive services similar to Early Head Start and Head Start.
2003	Legislature passes bill to establish the Oklahoma Partnership for School Readiness as a public-private early childhood initiative.
2006	State law charged OSDE in developing a high-quality, state funded pilot early childhood program for income-eligible infants and toddlers with a required private match.
2007	Tulsa Educare center opened.
2009	Oklahoma City Educare center opened; and state pre-k program is serving more than 37,000 children — 71 percent of all 4-year olds.





**William Librera**  
**New Jersey Commissioner of Education**  
**2002-2005**

Before becoming the state commissioner of education, William Librera served as teacher, principal, and superintendent for four school districts in New Jersey. A careful fiscal manager, Librera was known for expanding services for children while keeping budgets in check. He was co-chair of Governor Jim McGreevey’s education transition team before being appointed commissioner in 2002. He views improving early

childhood as one of his most significant accomplishments as commissioner — specifically, his work in dramatically increasing the number of low-income children enrolled in early childhood programs, and in increasing the quality of programs (those operated by local schools as well as those offered by community-based organizations). He built a strong team of national experts in early childhood and provided the leadership and tools to ensure that the New Jersey Supreme Court’s Abbott decision (details below) would be carefully and thoroughly implemented.

“Bill didn’t want us to have a heavy handed approach or play ‘gotcha’ with school districts. He wanted the department to be helpful to the districts and the early childhood community, so that together we would make things better for young children.” *Ellen Frede, Assistant to the Commissioner, Office of Early Childhood Education, 2002-05*



**Lucille Davy**  
**New Jersey Commissioner of Education**  
**2006-2010**

A mathematics teacher, a lawyer, and Governor McGreevey’s right hand as special counsel for education policy, Lucille Davy was at the table shaping the implementation of the Abbott program. She was later appointed commissioner in 2006 by Acting Governor Codey followed by Governor Corzine, and used that opportunity to extend the work begun by Librera and his team to expand quality early learning opportunities to even more

children. Davy is most proud of her work as commissioner to move pre-k into the school funding formula so that all children could benefit from pre-k, not just those in the Abbott districts; extend thinking of superintendents and principals to building a pre-k through 12<sup>th</sup>-grade continuum; and working in collaboration with Head Start to solidify the partnership between the state and community-based organizations to provide the highest quality experiences to New Jersey’s low-income children.

“There could not have been a more fierce advocate for early childhood...Her commitment came from a social justice priority. She couldn’t abide by the idea that just because you are poor you would not be able to succeed in school. She wanted every child to be ready for success in kindergarten and beyond.” *Jacqueline Jones, Assistant Commissioner, Division of Early Childhood Education, 2007-09*

## Key Accomplishments in Early Childhood

Under the leadership of two commissioners of education — William Librera and Lucille Davy — New Jersey significantly transformed opportunities for low-income 3- and 4-year-olds in 31 urban school districts. Intense involvement by the New Jersey Supreme Court to establish guaranteed funding levels and quality standards, combined with their own commitment to excellence and continuous improvement enabled Librera and Davy to build a high-quality pre-k system that transcends both schools and community-based providers.

### The Abbott Decision Provides Resources for High-Quality Pre-K to 31 Districts

Prior to the Abbott decision, pre-k in New Jersey was similar to many states: no standards, no training or degree requirements for early childhood teachers, and no real system for accountability. Further, school districts lacked any real expertise — management or curricular — in

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early childhood and did not effectively partner with the early childhood community. The Abbott v. Burke decisions changed all of this.

Abbott v. Burke was first brought about by the Education Law Center to illuminate the constitutionally substandard education provided

by public primary and secondary schools in New Jersey’s poor communities. A series of decisions beginning in 1985 (Abbott v. Burke or Abbott I) identified a set of high-need urban school districts; ordered that they receive funds sufficient to match the average per-pupil spending in the wealthiest school districts in the state (Abbott IV); and, in 1998 (Abbott V) mandated that high-quality pre-kindergarten programs be provided to all 3- and 4-year-old children in Abbott districts.

The court’s emphasis on early childhood was insightful and intentional. Influenced by research on child development and positive outcomes from varied early childhood programs, the court recognized that to address the achievement gap, the state would need to devote real resources to support the delivery of quality early childhood experiences for low-income children. But it wasn’t money alone that would be needed. The court spelled out requirements that must be met by the 31 Abbott school districts: a certified teacher who is a college graduate and an assistant teacher for each class; teacher pay on par with public school teachers; maximum class size of 15 students; developmentally appropriate curriculum; adequate facilities; and transportation, health, and other related services as needed by the child and family.

Recognizing that the Abbott districts would not have the capacity to serve all 3- and 4-year-olds in the public school setting, the court encouraged districts to contract with local child care and Head Start programs, provided that these community programs uphold the same quality requirements. “This was essential for our being able to expand rapidly and serve the number of children, as the schools had limited space and capacity,” said Librera. According to Gordon MacInnes, assistant commissioner for Abbott implementation, school districts contracted with

about 400 organizations to provide pre-k. “It wasn’t always easy as the cultures of the school districts and the private providers were quite different and they didn’t have much knowledge of each other,” said Frede who led the planning for the new pre-k initiative. The department had to work to build relationships, trust, and capacity all in a short period of time if they were to meet the requirements of the court order. These efforts paid off, as by 2004, 63 percent of nearly 40,000 children in Abbott pre-k programs were being served in private programs, including Head Start.

Librera and his team were ready to seize the opportunities provided by the Abbott mandates and funding. In the late 1990s when McGreevey began to explore the possibility of running for governor, he assembled a think tank of education experts — Davy, Librera, and a few others — who worked closely for several years to develop his education platform. “I played McGreevey’s opponent in debate prep. It gave me a lot of time to work with him on his education agenda. From 36 ideas he brought it down to a simple priority of all children reading by third grade. But to achieve that, he knew he needed to have high quality pre-k,” said MacInnes.

The Abbott money was key. “We felt it should be used to educate, not just comply with the law,” said MacInnes. It gave the department the leverage and resources needed to bring about systemic reform and build capacity for high-quality early learning programs in schools and in the community. The funding formula also allocated up to 2 percent of the dollars for management and program improvement efforts by the New Jersey Department of Education, which supported provision of materials, training, technical assistance, and evaluation efforts. Subsequently, the state provided additional funding of roughly \$4,500 per child to support a

wraparound program of before and aftercare and up to 65 days of school holiday and summer care. Another challenge in implementing the quality standards set in the Abbott decision was increasing the supply of teachers with degrees in early childhood education. “Right away, Bill got to work on issues of teacher credentialing to

**Applying the public school salary structure to the Abbott district pre-k teachers — whether they be in a community-based organization or a school setting — was key. It meant that they could attract and retain well-trained teachers and that they would be guaranteed to receive reasonable compensation.**

meet the court’s mandate. We formed partnerships with colleges to bring courses directly to the districts, and we strengthened a new primary-grade 3 credential. Within three years, 80 percent of the preschool teachers were certified,” said Davy. By 2007, 97 percent of all teachers were certified and degreed, up from only 38 percent in 1999.

Applying the public school salary structure to the Abbott district pre-k teachers — whether they be in a community-based organization or a school setting — was key. It meant that they could attract and retain well-trained teachers and that they would be guaranteed to receive reasonable compensation. “We started to see late model cars in the parking lots. They were finally making decent salaries and could afford to buy a car,” said Frede.

### **Building a Continuous Improvement Cycle to Drive High Quality**

To bring about the change the court expected, Librera and his team knew they needed to build an infrastructure that would define and support quality and assess impact. They needed to create

a real partnership for action between the state and local districts so success could be realized. “We couldn’t just dictate what needed to happen, nor could we sit back and leave anything to chance. We had to be there in the community, working with them, assessing child progress and other quality indicators, reflecting with them on their practices, and then using that information to further enhance practice,” said Davy.

Frede took the lead in developing an integrated program improvement effort including standards, curriculum, program monitoring, tools for assessing children and classroom quality, and an external program evaluation. To begin with, she organized an Early Childhood Education Work Group in 2002 to develop uniform

**“We couldn’t just dictate what needed to happen, nor could we sit back and leave anything to chance. We had to be there in the community, working with them, assessing child progress and other quality indicators, reflecting with them on their practices, and then using that information to further enhance practice.”**

standards for program operation, learning, and testing. Later adopted by the State Board of Education, the *Preschool Teaching and Learning Expectations: Standards of Quality* became the go-to document for the schools and community-based programs. The state provided extensive training to support understanding and implementation of these standards. In addition, districts were required to adopt one of five evidence-based curricula — Bank Street, Creative Curriculum, Curiosity Corner, Tools of the Mind, or High Scope. *The Abbott Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines* was published, as were guidelines and systems for data collection that were linked to the standards.

The accountability and program improvement system included gathering ongoing data on representative samples of classroom quality, children’s learning and development, and fiscal status. The Self Assessment Validation System was designed to assist districts in implementing an annual continuous improvement cycle. School district personnel were responsible for assessing their own programs. Then early childhood specialists trained by the Department conducted validation visits to one-third of the districts each year to confirm or validate the results of the local reviews. This tightly developed set of tools and resources created a situation where pre-k providers could deliver similar quality experiences for the Abbott children, regardless of setting or auspice. And it created an environment where providers felt supported and empowered to succeed. The department conveyed high expectations and instilled a growth mindset so Abbott superintendents knew that consistent movement toward expectations was most important.

In addition to measuring change at the local level — in classrooms, schools, and districts — the Department also wanted to understand the changes that were occurring across the state. The Early Learning Improvement Consortium was formed in 2002. The consortium, a partnership between researchers and early childhood faculty at five higher education institutions and the department, collects and reports data annually on program quality and children’s learning. It’s not a census; instead, it is a random sample of children and classrooms. Each fall assessments are conducted to measure kindergarteners’ abilities in language, literacy, and mathematics. Assessments used include the PPVT-3 and the Test de Vocabulario en Imagenes Peabody for Spanish speakers, the Print Awareness subset of

the Preschool Comprehensive Test of Phonological and Print Processing, the Woodcock-Johnson Subtest 10, and Applied Problems (math) and its Spanish language

**“Before Abbott, I was horrified by the lack of data to make decisions. But the continuous improvement cycle turned this around. Even in the beginning of data collection, we were showing steady improvement. Now, the data is used at the program level to continuously refine practice, and it is being used by the public and policy community as well.”**

equivalent. To measure classroom and teaching strategies, assessments used include the ECERS-R, SELA, and PCMI. “This focus on continuous improvement was huge and provided us with objective evidence that Abbott pre-k was working,” said Davy. “Before Abbott, I was horrified by the lack of data to make decisions. But the continuous improvement cycle turned this around. Even in the beginning of data collection, we were showing steady improvement. Now, the data is used at the program level to continuously refine practice, and it is being used by the public and policy community as well,” said Frede. “We were really helped by the good research because we could demonstrate that we’d get results if we did it right,” said Librera.

### **Enhancing Capacity of all Early Childhood Providers in Abbott Districts**

It was well understood that to quickly ramp up and provide quality pre-k to all of the 3- and 4-year-old children in the Abbott districts, several things needed to happen. The continuous improvement cycle and host of tools being developed by the department were

essential, but beyond that, the state needed to work purposefully to build relationships and capacity with private providers. Frede and her team developed a master teacher program. Frede and MacInnes together worked to enhance fiscal skills and responsibilities as part of the push for quality and efficiency. And later, Jones worked intensively with Head Start to bring them into the fold.

According to Librera, “There were many who were skeptical of the community-based organizations and wanted the program only to be operated by and in the schools. But the reality was that we had no ability to expand and take in the number of kids if we didn’t partner with the local organizations. We had to build those relationships and work together.”

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**Master Teachers:** Frede and her staff developed a master teacher program as a means for getting professional development to all teachers in school districts and community-based classrooms, thus ensuring implementation of a high-quality program. There is one well-trained master teacher for every 17-20 pre-k teachers in each Abbott district. Master teachers participate in 10 full-day trainings during their first year to equip them with the skills they need to carry out their role. They assist school districts in assessing their programs using the Self Assessment Validation System. They use the findings to inform professional development,



targeted in particular to classrooms with lower ratings on quality measures. Master teachers work in a hands-on way with teachers to model, coach, and build skills. They engage teachers in reflection, support their implementation of the curriculum, and identify ways to more fully involve parents. Often master teachers organize classroom and program level discussions around data and continuous improvement and then implement professional development/training opportunities that reflect findings from the data. Master teachers monitor and track their own work with the teachers and schools and are focused on outcomes. “The master teachers are wonderful and my right hand. They are regarded highly by the classroom teachers. They are right there in the classroom coaching, mentoring, and evaluating,” said Superintendent Laura Morana of Red Bank.

**Fiscal Management:** Supporting programs to engage in more careful fiscal management was essential. Fiscal specialists were trained on relationships to provide support and empower program staff with the skills they needed to run a high-quality, financially sound, and ethical program. “It was really about educating folks about efficiency and effectiveness,” said MacInnes. “The state already had audit teams in the three largest districts so we worked intensively in those communities. We didn’t go in as the inspector general or engage in critical inquiry; instead, it was a mixed role to serve the school system and to reflect the interest of the state. Basically, I redirected the staff to focus on auditing providers who were identified by the districts as showing signs of mismanaged finances.” The state later expanded their auditing effort to 20 percent of all community-based providers each year. Local school districts were required to hire fiscal specialists to provide budget guidance

and conduct quarterly reviews of expenditures to complement the state oversight effort. “Our goal was to move the program folk from operating out of an ATM or shoe box and into a mode that was more fiscally sound,” said Frede.

**Head Start:** The department knew it was important to have Head Start in the fold as partners in the Abbott districts and beyond — both to be able to serve the number of children intended and to create uniform quality. Head Start programs were included as eligible partners in the Abbott effort in 2003. However, from the perspective of Head Start, it wasn’t always seen as a fruitful opportunity. Some would be getting less money; all would be required to do more; and if part of Abbott, they would be subject to department oversight in addition to federal oversight. To complicate matters, the Head Start Collaboration Office was under the New Jersey Department of Human Services, not Education. Commissioner Davy went to the governor and advocated strongly for the reassignment of the collaboration office to Education. “She pushed it fiercely and it worked,” said Jones of Davy. Jones was particularly adept at understanding and working with the Head Start community and got right to work in improving relationships with Head Start.

All of these initiatives by the department leadership helped to persuade school superintendents as well as child care and Head Start leaders to join forces to expand early childhood services. Former Superintendent Tom Dunn said, “I had a dilemma. I wanted to establish a pre-k program, but I had no interest in developing pre-k programs with the local day care providers. I worried that the state would hold me accountable for what happened in the day care centers and I didn’t want that responsibility. But after a year, I changed my

mind and became the biggest advocate for including day care providers as partners in pre-k.” For Dunn, it was knowing that the department was staffed by competent people who would insist on quality in every setting and provide the resources/tools for achieving quality. He recognized it was going to be a big learning curve for both the public schools and the private providers. “Just because we were the public school, didn’t mean that we knew how to serve 3- and 4-year-olds. Some wanted to say that preschoolers were just younger kindergarteners and it was no big deal. But it is very different. The day cares knew this better than us,” said Dunn. Ultimately, it made sense to Dunn to learn and share in the growth/ implementation of the program together.

Superintendent Laura Morana also saw partnership as an opportunity to grow capacity across the board thus providing more children with high-quality pre-k experiences. She recalled, “When we got the expansion money, we knew we did not have the space/capacity to

**“Private providers understood that we’d all have to use the same curriculum; they would have to comply with the district’s hiring practices; they would all need to participate in professional development activities throughout the year that would be key to the effective implementation of the curriculum; and they would all be working together to create a seamless situation so wherever the child received pre-k, their experience would be of high quality and they would transition into kindergarten similarly.”**

serve all of the children through the school system so we worked with private providers — Head Start and child care. We told them that we would be building a relationship to partner in

expanding quality pre-k and thus sent the message that we were all in it together and would all work to increase quality through training, professional development, data collection, and analysis. Private providers understood that we’d all have to use the same curriculum; they would have to comply with the district’s hiring practices; they would all need to participate in professional development activities throughout the year that would be key to the effective implementation of the curriculum; and they would all be working together to create a seamless situation so wherever the child received pre-k, their experience would be of high quality and they would transition into kindergarten similarly.”

### **Building a Birth to Third Grade Continuum and Extending Abbott to More Children**

Both Commissioners Librera and Davy knew that the real benefits of pre-k are contingent on a close alignment between the pre-k program and the public school. For Librera, the focus on literacy was important, and he wanted to make sure that the early literacy skills being developed in pre-k would directly blend into intensive literacy programs in the primary grades. Reading by third grade, after all, was a key campaign priority of the governor. Davy supported this and “took the ball further down the field,” as she said. In 2007, she reorganized the department and created a formal pre-k to grade 3 focus and elevated the early childhood branch to a division. Davy and Jones developed pre-k through 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade standards in all content areas. They also worked on kindergarten testing to ensure teachers have data to understand the skill set of children entering their classrooms. “We needed teachers to have the data and begin to think differently about the relationship between early childhood education and kindergarten.”

From the perspective of a superintendent, “This alignment was important, otherwise preschool is seen as separate and disconnected from the education system,” said Morana.

When Davy took office, she also wanted to find a way to take the good work done with Abbott pre-k and expand it to more children. She felt that no matter where you lived, if a child is poor, that child should get free pre-k in order to be prepared to enter kindergarten. What happened over time was that the population of poor children shifted so that in the mid-2000s, “You had 49 percent of children on free/reduced lunches who were NOT living in Abbott districts. The need was beyond the 31 original Abbott districts, and we had to figure out how to meet the need,” said Davy.

At the same time that Davy wanted to find a way to expand pre-k, she also began to take a close look at the overall school funding formula. One benefit of this approach was to provide a stable source of funding for early childhood. As Librera notes, “If I was to give one piece of advice to other chiefs, I’d tell them to think about how you could get the governor to agree to provide a

**“If I was to give one piece of advice to other chiefs, I’d tell them to think about how you could get the governor to agree to provide a predicted level of support for early childhood over an extended period of time. When you don’t know what resources will be on the table, it wrecks havoc. You need the predictable support so that you can sit, reason, think, plan, and move forward thoughtfully.”**

predicted level of support for early childhood over an extended period of time. When you don’t know what resources will be on the table, it wrecks havoc. You need the predictable support

so that you can sit, reason, think, plan, and move forward thoughtfully.” The department convened an expert panel in 2003 to look at a hypothetical school and calculate what it would take to deliver the core curriculum, and what weights should be added for other conditions/circumstances (e.g., poverty). The work stalled but was picked up again in 2006 with an added focus on pre-k. “We came up with what it should cost and realized that many Abbott districts were spending more,” said Davy. The new school aid formula was ultimately approved by the court as a substitute for Abbott, thus extending beyond the original 31 districts to every district in the state. The original Abbott pre-k requirements on teacher qualifications, pay, class size, and the like were all upheld and were to extend to the new districts. “I consider adding pre-k to the funding formula to be one of our greatest accomplishments. We made the good case because we had data to show that it works and Governor Corzine knew it would be successful. He knew it would change outcomes for poor children for the rest of their lives,” said Davy. While Governor Corzine supported putting pre-k into the formula, when Governor Christie came into office during the middle of the 2009-10 school year, and he cut the funding for expansion. So the vision of extending Abbott pre-k to all poor children has not been realized and New Jersey is back to having Abbott pre-k in just the original 31 districts and a few additional districts that received expansion money.

## Leadership Strategies

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Taken together, Librera and Davy’s leadership created a model early childhood program for young children in high-need urban school districts. Pre-k enrollment in the Abbott districts expanded from only 3,300 children

in 1998 to more than 41,000 in 2009. New Jersey’s model is notable for its commitment to high quality (well-trained and equitably-compensated teachers; a strong infrastructure of standards-based assessments of children and program quality, linked with ongoing professional development and technical assistance; and fiscal accountability efforts); provision of intensive and sustained services (a two-year, full-day/full-year model); and a strategy to build the capacity of community-based providers as well as school districts.

Moreover, their commitment to continuous improvement is paying off in terms of enhanced quality and stronger outcomes for children:

- Ratings of classroom quality in literacy using the Supports for Early Literacy Assessment (SELA) showed 76 percent of classrooms providing good to excellent quality (up from 42 percent in 2003) while less than 1 percent were low quality (reduced from 12 percent in 2003).
- A National Institute for Early Education Research 2006 evaluation found kindergarteners who attended two years of pre-k had cut the vocabulary gap in relation to national norms in half and increased gains in learning in math by more than 40 percent when compared to a control group. Significant benefits for children who attended the state pre-k program were sustained over time. For example, at 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, only 5.3 percent of children who attended pre-k for two years had been retained, while the retention rate for comparable students who did not attend pre-k was 10.7 percent.

Librera and Davy were successful at advancing early childhood in New Jersey in part because

they were firm believers from the get-go about the value of early learning, and because they used their relationships and positions to create systemic reforms. They embraced the Abbott decision as an opportunity to bring about increased quality across the myriad of early childhood providers and to create clear articulation between early childhood and public education. A solid relationship with the governor ensured they had his backing and the latitude to implement the court order. Hiring real experts for leadership roles at the Department and empowering them to do their jobs was also important. And engaging the superintendents and principals as partners in reform was essential.

***Librera and Davy built upon their solid relationship with Governor McGreevey.*** Both Librera and Davy were part of McGreevey’s inner circle even before he was elected governor. Davy in particular was instrumental in shaping the education platform. “I worked with him as a candidate and went down to North Carolina with him to meet with Governor Hunt in the summer of 2000. We learned about Smart Start and the importance of investing in early learning. We met with leaders of Smart Start and state teacher leaders. It resonated with his interest in providing the best education to poor kids,” said Davy. She pulled together the team of “thought leaders” — including Librera — who provided solid advice and support on education issues to the candidate and then governor. With Davy as McGreevey’s special counsel on education issues, she was at the table in the governor’s office, making sure education was high on the agenda. She had unusual access to the governor and top folks in the administration. And she worked in concert with Librera and his team in the department so she knew what they needed and could advocate

on their behalf. “It was immensely helpful to have the governor’s office on our side,” said Frede. “The governor’s commitment never wavered — he never blinked. Even when there were growing concerns over the budget, he supported increases in pre-k,” said Davy.

**“When I have people I trust, I let them run. I can be their advocate with the governor, the unions, the superintendents, and others.”**

**Librera and Davy hired strong staff and gave them latitude to build an effective system.** Both Librera and Davy respected the expertise of their staff and saw their role more as running interference and ensuring the staff had sufficient resources, rather than making day-to-day decisions about the early childhood portfolio. “Ellen asleep will always know more about early childhood than I will. I had to be her public face. I told her that I would take care of the politics and the angry crowds, make sure she had the resources she needed, and she could work on the substance,” said Librera. Davy’s approach was similar: “Jacqueline was the expert and I was a full believer. I had my hands full with other things. When I have people I trust, I let them run. I can be their advocate with the governor, the unions, the superintendents, and others,” said Davy. Providing latitude to the staff didn’t mean that they abdicated responsibility, nor were they removed from major strategy discussions. “Bill had weekly senior staff meetings and monthly Abbott Coordinating Council meetings...he was intellectually curious about what the staff was doing and wanted to be kept regularly informed. But he gave staff latitude to lay out a course and then he supported it,” said MacInnes. According to Frede, “Bill had my back. I went to him when there was a problem and he helped me think through challenges.” Similarly, Jones said, “Lucille

made sure I had a good team of staff. She fought to keep good staff in the Division of Early Childhood Education even in the midst of government downsizing....she respected me and my opinions and let me manage as I saw fit.”

**Librera was committed to engaging superintendents and principals and making a clear connection to what was happening locally.**

A local superintendent four times over, Librera and his staff knew it was essential to work locally if they wanted to see real change in the quality of early childhood programs and if they were to enroll the numbers of children required by the court order. “I’d tell folks whether or not you like it, it must be and we will help you be as successful as possible,” said Librera. He knew that they had to find a way to motivate the superintendents and principals and that just issuing mandates and memos would not work. Librera and his staff understood the culture — according to MacInnes, “They [superintendents] will do the paperwork and implement whatever is ordered but it won’t change the bureaucracy or practice to yield real long-term change.” While some superintendents were willing to jump on board, many just saw Abbott as just another mandate. So in addition to developing tools, resources, and the continuous improvement cycle, the department also brought together superintendents for peer-to-peer encouragement and coaching to warm them up to the importance of early learning and the connection to school readiness. Meetings were held in various locations so superintendents could see what other districts were doing. “We got the superintendents to see and understand the value of quality pre-k and believe in the worthiness of the investments,” said Davy.

In addition, the department held face-to-face meetings with each district at least once a year, twice a year for the big districts. These meetings



were an opportunity for the department to share data with the districts that they normally would not have seen. “Together, we talked about the data, what it meant, what we could learn from it, and what could be done differently. The first agenda item was always early literacy and the juncture between pre-k and literacy. We’d talk about things: How many kindergarten teachers visit the pre-k classes to know where the kids are coming from? How did the pre-k kids do this year in the 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade test? How do you use the diagnostic tests and what do they mean? We tried to make these discussions as concrete as possible,” said Maclnnes. The meetings conveyed a collaborative approach to implementing reforms. It wasn’t Librera’s style to play “gotcha” and this demonstrated his commitment to supporting the districts and sharing in the responsibility and ongoing learning. “We were all in it together — and we all worked to contribute to the success and reputation that the program now enjoys,” said Dunn.

**Davy provided important continuity to the department and pre-k reform.** “I wasn’t a ‘new chief.’ I’d been part of the early planning, was in the governor’s office and part of the internal discussions about Abbott. The plan was underway and it was about keeping the ball moving down the field,” said Davy. While some staff changed, (Frede left and Jones came in to replace her) — the policies, tools, and resources were consistent so that it truly was about reinforcing the pre-k reforms underway in the Abbott districts. Continuing to build and deepen partnerships with community providers, including Head Start, was key and Davy and Jones took these to new heights. Davy was also able to build on the solid foundation and success of Abbott pre-k to advocate for inclusion of pre-k in the school funding formula. Overall, her involvement in early childhood policy in New Jersey spanned

from the late 1990s to January 2010; either within the inner circle or at the helm, she consistently advocated for quality early learning opportunities for low-income children as a key strategy for ameliorating the achievement gap.

## Lessons for Other States

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So what can Librera and Davy’s experience in New Jersey teach other chiefs?

1. **Hire and support staff who have a real expertise in early childhood** – who know the research, who know what quality early childhood programming should look like, who value using data for ongoing learning and continuous improvement – and make them part of your senior staff. Any real race to the top has to begin with quality early learning opportunities for children at the most risk for academic, social, and emotional challenge. By having experts in early childhood in the department and at the leadership table, you can build a quality aligned system that will best prepare children for school entry and success in the elementary years and beyond.
2. **Collaboration with the broader early childhood community is critical.** Though some superintendents and principals may initially reject the idea of sharing resources and responsibility with community providers, the schools don’t always have the expertise nor the space to go it alone. Bringing the community providers into the fold, establishing standards that apply to all settings, and providing tools, training, and professional development for all will ultimately result in similar high-quality care being provided by a larger number of providers.



## A Final Word

“Chiefs must be tireless advocates for early childhood....Part of my job was public advocacy – I needed to be able to respond to questions and criticism. I needed to be able to tell and articulate the difference between quality early childhood education and day care. And I needed to be clear about how pre-k was part of public education.” William Librera

“If we get this right, we’ll make a big difference. We saw kids who knew their numbers, letters, could raise their hands and wait their turn, listen to a story and have a conversation about it...all of those things that prepare you for kindergarten.” Lucille Davy

## Key Dates

1985	NJ Supreme Court Abbott v Burke ruling (“Abbott I”) declares that the public primary and secondary schools in poor communities were substandard. The court mandated that state education funding in poor districts should be the same as funding in wealthy districts and identified 31 districts that became known as the “Abbott districts.”
1998	A subsequent ruling on Abbott v Burke ordered educational reforms to early childhood education. The court ordered universal, well-planned, high-quality preschool education for 3- and 4-year-olds in 31 districts.
2000	NJ Supreme Court ruled that all teachers in Abbott preschools must have a minimum of a bachelor’s degree with P-3 certificate by September 2004.
2002	Librera becomes commissioner of education.
2002	27,000 children are enrolled in pre-k in Abbott districts, including partnerships with 450 community providers.
2002	Early Childhood Education Work Group formed to develop uniform standards for program operation, learning, and testing.
2002	Early Learning Improvement Consortium formed to collect and report data annually on program quality and children’s learning.
2002	<a href="#">Abbott Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines</a> published by NJDOE.
2003	Self Assessment Validation System begins to be used annually in districts.
2004	Pre-k enrollment in Abbott districts expands to nearly 40,000 children. 63 percent of students are served in community-based programs.
Sept 2005	Davy appointed acting commissioner of the department.
2006	Davy was nominated to be commissioner in July 2006 and was confirmed in October 2006.
2007	NJDOE reorganized to create a new Division of Early Childhood Education with Jacqueline Jones as assistant commissioner.
2008	New school aid formula, including funding for pre-k extended Abbott to another 86 districts. But it was then not funded by Governor Christie.
Jan 2010	Lucille Davy steps down as commissioner.



**Deborah A. Gist**  
**Rhode Island Commissioner of Education**  
**2009 - Present**

A former pre-k teacher, elementary school educator, administrator, and a senior policy analyst at the U.S. Department of Education, Deborah Gist was appointed commissioner of education by the Rhode Island Board of Regents in 2009. She has worked in Texas and Florida, and most recently served as state superintendent of education in Washington, DC. Since her appointment in Rhode Island, she has set forth a strategic plan for education that encompasses

early learning, worked to include pre-k in the school funding formula, and successfully competed for both Race to the Top federal competitions — the first targeted k-12 and the second focused on the early learning years. Gist is the co-chair of the Early Learning Council in her state and actively embraces public-private partnerships to advance change in education. She is quick to credit others in the state for laying a foundation that is crucial for the current early learning efforts taking hold, from early learning standards, to a pilot pre-k effort and quality rating system, to active advocacy across the state.

“She is so deeply committed to early childhood education. There has never been a question about her knowledge or support....When she took Governor Carcieri on the road to visit some early learning sites, it was clear how much she enjoys being in programs. She got right down there on the floor with the kids. We’ve heard her say ‘the best day is a day when I can go out and sit on the floor with preschoolers.’” *Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director, Rhode Island Kids Count and Co-Chair of the Early Learning Council*

## Key Accomplishments in Early Childhood

“When I was preparing to interview for the commissioner of education position and pulled up the National Institute for Early Education Research report on state pre-k programs, I was shocked that the Rhode Island page said ‘no program.’ I knew this was problematic and that we would need to do something about it. But then when I arrived, I was so pleased to learn that many people in the state were on top of this and had been working to change this in meaningful ways. Change was owned by smart, passionate people who were doing lots of things to increase access to quality early childhood opportunities across the state,” said Gist.

And those smart people were both inside and outside of government. Rhode Island Kids Count, organized in 1995 as the last wave of Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count states, was a major player, raising awareness about a host of issues important to child well-being: health, education, economic well-being, and safety. “From the beginning we had a focus on early learning and child care in general. We knew we had to be involved in both early learning and K-12 if we were to really be about eliminating poverty,” said Burke Bryant. They had the resources and capacity to take on important issues, like designing BrightStars, the voluntary quality rating system for child care. The United Way of Rhode Island funded Rhode Island Kids Count to develop BrightStars, which was three years in the making

and is designed to help programs continuously build capacity to enhance quality. Rhode Island Kids Count was highly skilled in public relations and advocacy and was able to call attention to the need for action in ways that state employees often are not. “It is absolutely true that Kids Count has been a big advocate for early childhood. They challenged state partners to step up to the plate,” said Karen Pucciarelli, former coordinator of the Rhode Island Early Learning Standards Project.

State employees themselves were working on access and quality both within the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) and the Department of Human Services. During the welfare reform era, the Department of Human Services engaged RIDE to be a thought partner in considering how quality and accessibility could be enhanced in the state funded Head Start and child care programs. Using funds from the child care quality set aside, resources were transferred to RIDE to develop early learning standards. Issued in 2003, “The Rhode Island Early Learning Standards describe what 3- to 5-year-old children need to know and do,” said Michele Palermo, RIDE coordinator of early childhood initiatives. In addition, RIDE developed supports for programs to be able to use the standards. “The early learning standards professional development supports focus on aligning the curriculum, child assessment, and how to differentiate instruction and engage families,” said Palermo. These efforts, while initially designed for state funded Head Start and child care, also provide the foundation for quality in current expansion efforts.

Conversations about state funded pre-k started in the mid 2000s when Peter McWalters was commissioner. With a helpful nudge by the advocacy community, especially Rhode Island Kids Count, McWalters and his team embarked on the necessary planning for a pre-k program.

McWalters and Burke Bryant co-chaired the Pre-K Design Team and gathered information from other states, studied models, and considered what could be possible for Rhode Island. “The planning for pre-k was completed under McWalters. We also started a small demonstration program with a set curriculum and assessment that is now being expanded under Commissioner Gist,” said Palermo.

**“No money would be coming directly to RIDE, but the commissioner was there to testify in support of Starting Right nevertheless because he cared about early investments and knew this was the right thing to do.”**

But the economy wrecked havoc and early learning was not protected. First to feel the impact of the recession and seeming the last to experience recovery, Rhode Island went from booming resources and possibility to despair. “In 1997-98, the Rhode Island General Assembly had passed Starting Right, a comprehensive bill that increased the subsidy floor for child care eligibility from 180 percent of poverty to 225 percent. We were able to put money into supports for child care and started to build a model for comprehensive child care á la Head Start with health, social services, and parent support. We had enough money to add 200-300 children to child care who would have this full range of services,” said Larry Pucciarelli, Head Start collaboration director. It was a very exciting time. “I recall a legislative hearing table with every department head sitting together saying the money for Starting Right would enhance child care and early learning opportunities. No money would be coming directly to RIDE, but the commissioner was there to testify in support of Starting Right nevertheless because he cared about early investments and knew this was the right thing to

do,” said Burke Bryant. “But then the economy bottomed out and the legislature approved downsizing or eliminating many initiatives,” said L. Pucciarelli. For example, state funding for the Head Start program dropped from a high of 400 children to 156 state funded slots.

**“The combination of Deborah’s tremendous energy and positive outlook, a strong group of dynamic advocates on the ground, and the ripeness for action in early childhood created real momentum to make change for young children in Rhode Island.”**

Nevertheless, the provider, policy, and advocacy communities had been working together and knew the next steps they would take when things turned around in their state. “We had experienced an era of great expansion and wanted to continue with the momentum but redirect energy and resources on improving quality,” said K. Pucciarelli. With the foundation set and the economy showing signs of improvement, Gist was able to enter a state ready for change. “Lots of things started to come together for early childhood,” said Palermo. “The combination of Deborah’s tremendous energy and positive outlook, a strong group of dynamic advocates on the ground, and the ripeness for action in early childhood created real momentum to make change for young children in Rhode Island,” said Tony Maione, president and chief executive officer of the United Way of Rhode Island.

### **Prioritizing Early Childhood Within Rhode Island Education Reform**

Gist set out to prioritize early childhood by creating a strategic plan for education that begins with investments in the early years and by relocating staff within RIDE who work on early learning to reinforce the need for alignment from early childhood through 12th grade.

**Strategic Plan.** After just six months on the job, Gist unveiled *Transforming Education in Rhode Island*, a rigorous strategic plan that sets forth goals, strategies to reach the goals, and objective measures to chart progress. The plan was developed with input from RIDE staff, teachers, parents, and community members — including early childhood programs — and was ultimately adopted by the Board of Regents. There was a clear and intentional process and a commitment to build upon RIDE’s ongoing work. Early childhood is featured prominently within the context of closing the achievement gap and accelerating achievement for every child. “Seeing early childhood in the final plan was an important acknowledgement for all of us,” said Palermo.

**“At this point, we don’t think of having an early learning event without also having K-12 in the room. It’s all about educational advocacy beginning at birth and on through the 12th grade.”**

“Deborah looks at education as a continuum beginning in pre-k. She talks about needing a strong alignment between preschool and kindergarten. She speaks publicly about closing the achievement gap,” said K. Pucciarelli. Burke Bryant echoes the refrain, “At this point, we don’t think of having an early learning event without also having K-12 in the room. It’s all about educational advocacy beginning at birth and on through the 12th grade.”

**Department Reorganization.** Before Gist’s appointment, early childhood was in the Office of Special Populations in RIDE. “Those of us in the department at the time felt that it didn’t really belong there. We imagined an organizational structure where early childhood would be more visible and intentionally linked to elementary school,” said Palermo. And that is just what Gist

did. “She moved early childhood to the Office of Instruction, Assessment and Curriculum and added a few more people,” said Palermo. “It wasn’t about just moving us physically. It was intentional

**“I felt it was important to include pre-k in the funding formula in order to have a regular, predictable funding stream for this important program. Also it was a way to ensure pre-k would be included as part of the overall education landscape making it pre-k to grade 12. This was an important milestone and not an easy thing to do.”**

and part of Deborah’s strategy to help us think about education being pre-k to grade 12 and making sure that we work together in a strategic way. We aren’t just on the same floor; we are in the meeting, at the table, and really working collaboratively,” said Palermo.

### **Using the Funding Formula to Expand a Stable State Investment in Quality Pre-K**

Prior to Gist’s arrival, Commissioner McWalters and RIDE staff created a small pre-k demonstration program that was supporting seven classrooms. Gist knew the demonstration held promise, but it needed a stable source of funding to expand. “When I arrived, folks were trying so hard to make sure that it received funding,” said Gist. Together with Rhode Island Kids Count, Gist worked with the general assembly leadership to establish a pre-k fund within the school funding formula that would expand each year to reach a high of \$10 million by year 10. It was not a per-pupil funding allocation but instead was a designated categorical fund. “Deborah provided tremendous leadership to crack the funding formula. She told the legislature that Rhode Island was late coming to pre-k and we could no longer ignore 30 years of research on early childhood as the foundation for educational

success. This was the way to have a real impact on outcomes for children,” said Burke Bryant. “I felt it was important to include pre-k in the funding formula in order to have a regular, predictable funding stream for this important program. Also it was a way to ensure pre-k would be included as part of the overall education landscape making it pre-k to grade 12. This was an important milestone and not an easy thing to do,” said Gist.

The legislature passed the revised funding formula in June 2010, to go into effect for the 2012 fiscal year. It was established that the pre-k money would come to RIDE, rather than the districts, and RIDE would then administer a request for proposal process to direct the funds to high-quality pre-k programs in the districts of highest need. This gave RIDE quality control. “It’s a mixed delivery model, but all programs are required to meet RIDE’s Comprehensive Early Childhood Education Program Standards for design of the classrooms and the learning environment,” said Palermo. While the legislature did not include funds for pre-k in the budget for the current fiscal year (FY 2012); Governor Chafee’s proposed fiscal year 2013 budget, currently before the legislature, would include \$1.4 million for pre-k.

### **Providing Leadership for an Overall Early Childhood System**

Gist was determined to capitalize on new leadership at the federal level that was calling on states to develop cohesive early childhood systems. From requirements in the Head Start reauthorization to form an Early Learning Council to funding opportunities through the U.S. Department of Education Race to the Top, Gist embraced these opportunities and provided essential leadership.

**Early Learning Council.** The Rhode Island Early Learning Council was launched in 2010.

“Obviously we were required to do this, but we approached it as much more than a requirement,” said Gist. Serving as co-chairs, Burke Bryant and Gist use the council as an opportunity to create a very positive place for stakeholders to come together. They use the council as a forum for reflecting upon past plans, brainstorming new ideas, and combining the two to move the state forward. With the other key state agency directors serving on the council – education, human services, health and child welfare – it has evolved to be much like a children’s cabinet. “It’s a place where real work and cross-department collaboration gets done, not just another meeting,” said Palermo.

In addition to the 22 members appointed by the governor, they established an Early Learning Council Workgroup that reaches beyond the 22 to include other stakeholders. Importantly, the workgroup is organized by Palermo from RIDE, Leanne Barrett from Rhode Island Kids Count, and L. Pucciarelli from the Head Start Collaboration Office. “We created an atmosphere where we all would come to the same table, roll up our sleeves, and work together, cognizant of the different roles each person plays. We knew that when we worked together, we could do good work for the children,” said Burke Bryant.

“It was significant that Deborah took the role of co-chair of the council. She is truly involved. She attends all of the meetings and is always well prepared. It shows that she truly cares about early childhood,” said K. Pucciarelli. “She really raised the visibility and spotlight,” said Palermo. And together, Gist and Burke Bryant made a terrific pair to provide the right leadership. “Elizabeth and Deborah were immediately joined at the hip. It’s a confluence of great leaders with a ready environment and clearly good things will happen,” said Maione.

### **Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge.**

Gist jumped at the opportunity to apply for the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge. “Deborah’s tremendous leadership and confidence from winning Race to the Top K-12 were huge benefits. But this was different. It was not just RIDE. Early Learning Challenge required partnership across departments,” said Burke Bryant. But all of the departments were already working together via the Early Learning Council, and they were addressing many of the very issues that were called for as part of the Early Learning Challenge proposal – a data project with the National Governors Association, a kindergarten assessment, BrightStars Quality Rating and Improvement System, pre-k standards, and support and professional development for child care providers and programs, including at-home providers. Palermo saw it as a healthy test of partnerships, “It was an opportunity for us to really test out our partnerships and develop a united vision and understand our individual pieces of the work.” K. Pucciarelli stated, “Deborah knew this was an opportunity to build a system where all of the small efforts could expand and meld together.”

“During the development of the proposal for the Early Learning Challenge Fund, there were many strategy meetings in Deborah’s office. I recall she had a hand in going out to the other state agencies to craft interstate collaboration agreements,” said K. Pucciarelli. She used the council and workgroup to develop the application. “The council and a grant work team including RIDE staff, other state department staff, and Rhode Island Kids Count had the ability to crank it day and night,” said Burke Bryant. And Rhode Island’s application benefited from the strong support of the governor, the legislative leadership, and over 70 community leaders who wrote letters of support.



Gist, Burke Bryant, and others envision the system that will be created as a result of the successful Early Learning Challenge grant. Gist notes that,

**“We will see more kids coming to kindergarten better prepared to be successful right away. When they arrive at kindergarten, we will have data so that we can know all that is possible to know about each child including understanding their strengths and any areas that need development. And we will continue to build alignment between birth to five and K-12 experiences.”**

“We will be able to lift up quality and support early childhood educators to provide the best experience for our littlest Rhode Islanders. We will see more kids coming to kindergarten better prepared to be successful right away. When they arrive at kindergarten, we will have data so that we can know all that is possible to know about each child including understanding their strengths and any areas that need development. And we will continue to build alignment between birth to five and K-12 experiences.”

Burke Bryant is especially pleased that there will be one quality rating system that all programs, districts, and private providers will be part of. “It’s a small state, but we have lots of quality standards. There are the Head Start standards, BrightStars, licensing standards, and comprehensive early childhood education program standards. We will use the Early Learning Challenge to bring this all together in a more meaningful way,” said K. Pucciarelli. “What we need is a gradual pathway for the programs to move from the floor of licensing to the higher standards. The goal is to have one continuum that is clear, comprehensive, and aligned and that includes achievable steps along the way and support for programs to advance,”

said Palermo. L. Pucciarelli is looking forward to early learning guidelines that will span birth to five. “Our 3-5 standards are among the best in the nation. Now we can develop the best in the country 0-5 guidelines,” he said. Palermo looks forward to advances in professional development. “We will build a professional development system that is aligned with the knowledge and competencies set forth in workforce standards. We’ll use this system to support a clear path to quality,” said Palermo.

Proudly, Gist states that, “We are only one of six states to get both Race to the Top K-12 and Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge. We were over the moon excited about this.” Stated Burke Bryant, “We have an enormous amount of work ahead of us, but this is a powerful example of inside-outside partnership. This won’t work if you don’t have a commissioner like Deborah who values the model of inside-outside leadership”

## Leadership Strategies

Gist’s personable authentic style suits the education and early childhood communities quite well. In her nearly three years on the job, she has demonstrated a commitment to building on what works and dismisses the idea that reforms need to start from scratch. She regularly speaks out in support of quality early childhood programs and presides thoughtfully to build consensus and true collaboration. And above all, she has strategically developed relationships with early childhood education and care providers to create an environment of trust, respect, and mutual appreciation. She has done this by sharing her personal beliefs in the value of early childhood and by building trust.

***Gist is building on existing state efforts, taking them to the next level.*** From her efforts to expand

the pre-k pilot to considering how BrightStars would fit into a full-scale quality rating and improvement system, Gist consistently looks at what has and is being done in the state and whether current efforts can be built upon to reach higher levels of quality and larger numbers of children. According to Burke Bryant, “Deborah was quickly in agreement that if we have a quality rating system already working well, we should think about expanding that rather than creating something entirely new. She agreed BrightStars was an asset and wanted to build from there. It’s both about what is out there and what our strengths are. She works to involve all leadership and build on whatever pieces are working wherever they might be.”

**Gist is providing consistent reinforcement of the importance of early childhood in all of her communication.** “Early childhood education is a core part of what Deborah talks about,” said K. Pucciarelli. She doesn’t need coaching or talking points; it is simply part of her vernacular. “I came without needing to be convinced of the value of investing in young children,” said Gist. “She communicates relentlessly about early childhood and works with great energy to find champions. She uses every opportunity to reinforce the importance of the early years to achieve the goals we want for Rhode Island children,” said Burke Bryant. And she communicates in a way that all can understand. Maione remarks, “You don’t need a Ph.D. to understand what she is saying. When she rolled out the strategic plan for the department, she was able to talk about what was needed in a way that was understood by the education community, the business community, and other stakeholders.”

With the media following her closely, she has many opportunities to remind Rhode Islanders that we owe our children quality learning opportunities regardless of their age. When the media isn’t there, she is using new media to get the message out.

“New technology is her thing. She’s constantly in meetings taking pictures and tweeting about where she is, what is being discussed. She brings it all alive for the rest of us,” said Maione.

**“We work really hard to be inclusive. We wanted to open the council up and engage more voices. We invite folks to our meetings and give everyone a chance to speak. And we formed workgroups that are a mix of people from the council and others from the community.”**

**Gist is demonstrating astute capacity to build consensus and support collaboration.** In her role as co-chair of the Early Learning Council, Gist demonstrates time and again her ability to engage people with a broad range of perspectives. “There are no feelings of a RIDE take-over because she is co-chair. Deborah is very inclusive and engages people in the process so all are able to contribute their thoughts and shape the outcome,” said Palermo. According to Gist, “We work really hard to be inclusive. We wanted to open the council up and engage more voices. We invite folks to our meetings and give everyone a chance to speak. And we formed workgroups that are a mix of people from the council and others from the community. Having such an inclusive process is good, but we have to be very clear about roles, responsibilities, and expectations so that we don’t confuse people.” This inclusive, open approach — where she listens equally to those inside the department and those outside — has built a tremendous amount of respect and trust. “People really trust Deborah,” said L. Pucciarelli.

In addition to being highly skilled in making sure all ideas are heard, Gist is very clear and methodological in her approach to the work. “Deborah is always clear about what she is looking for, defining goals, developing a plan, and measuring achievements. She applies this

approach to her work in RIDE and also her work on the Early Learning Council,” said Palermo. It means that everyone knows where things are headed and can work together in a transparent environment. “She has this extraordinary knack for being a positive cheerleader and at the same time she doesn’t mince her words,” said Maione. Palermo continues, “When Deborah asks people a question or engages them in work, it comes from a genuine place. She seems driven by a belief that this is our collective work — not mine, not RIDE — and as a community, we need to come together to be successful.”

**“I have this project from junior high school that I did in Mr. Henderson’s class. It’s called ‘My Career as a Preschool Teacher.’ I knew back then I wanted to be a preschool teacher.”**

***Gist is building relationships with the early learning community.*** Deborah formed a personal bond with the early learning community from the start. As a new Commissioner, she traveled the state and shared with providers a treasure from her childhood. “I have this project from junior high school that I did in Mr. Henderson’s class. It’s called ‘My Career as a Preschool Teacher.’ I knew back then I wanted to be a preschool teacher. I studied early childhood as an undergraduate. It’s always been my passion,” said Gist. “She came across as authentic. She quickly won over the early learning community by showing appreciation to them for all they do each day to prepare children for school,”

said Burke Bryant. She is personable, accessible, and appreciative. And, according to Palermo, “She is fun! The early childhood community really appreciates that.”

## Lessons for Other States

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So what can Gist’s experiences thus far in Rhode Island teach other chiefs?

1. **Build on the promising early childhood efforts that are already happening in your state.** Whether it is a pilot quality rating system being tested in one community or a draft set of early learning standards, consider what may already be under development. What can be learned from the work underway? What changes might be needed to capitalize on the work? Is it possible that the work could go to scale and become part of a coordinated early childhood system?
2. **Preside in a way that encourages active engagement of partners both within and outside state government.** Create an environment that is characterized by openness, trust, and respect. Work together to develop a shared vision and commitment for moving forward to advance quality early learning within the context of broader education reform. Be clear in defining roles, setting expectations, and outlining an agenda that all can work on. And make the process engaging and fun.

**A Final Word**

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“Learning in the early years is the foundation for all that follows. Progress forward on early learning has to start with ownership and passion for the issue in the chief state school officer.” *Deborah A. Gist*

## Key Dates

2003	RIDE develops early learning standards.
2004-05	United Way of Rhode Island and Rhode Island Kids Count begin work to develop BrightStars, a voluntary quality rating system.
2009	Deborah Gist appointed Rhode Island Commissioner by the Board of Regents.
2010	Gist unveils <i>Transforming Education in Rhode Island</i> , a strategic plan for education.
2010	Governor establishes Early Learning Council and appoints Deborah Gist and Elizabeth Burke Bryant co-chairs.
June 2010	Legislature passes revision to the school funding formula and includes a dedicated categorical fund for pre-k as part of the formula.
August 2010	Race to the Top K-12 proposal is awarded to Rhode Island.
December 2011	Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Fund proposal is awarded to Rhode Island.



**Brenda Cassellius**  
**Minnesota State Commissioner of Education**  
**2011 - Present**

With just one year under her belt as the state commissioner of education, Brenda Cassellius is already making a name for herself among those who value the importance of early learning. While her prior experience was as a middle and high school teacher and superintendent, as commissioner she is playing an essential leadership role in advancing high-quality early childhood programs and systems. In her first 12 months in office, she and the governor issued a 7-point plan for advancing education in Minnesota with significant portions of the plan addressing early childhood; created a new Office of Early Learning (OEL) to coordinate leadership across state agencies; worked to build alignment between early childhood programs and the elementary schools; and worked with other private and public sector leaders to apply for and receive funding from three highly competitive federal programs — the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Fund, Investing in Innovation (I3), and Promise Neighborhoods. Cassellius chairs the Children’s Cabinet made up of the commissioners of education, health, and human services and this group provided the leadership for writing and implementing the Early Learning Challenge grant. Her commitment to early learning is personal — as a child she benefited from being enrolled in Head Start and now as an adult reflects on the different trajectory that she has had in life as compared to an older sibling who did not have the same opportunity. She openly attributes her achievements to Head Start’s early intervention and challenges anyone who dismisses the importance of quality early learning.

“Brenda is passionate about closing the achievement gap. There has been more collaboration between schools and early childhood programs in the past year than I have seen at any time in my 10 years as an executive director. What she is doing is going to result in better outcomes for all Minnesota children.”

*Fred Storti, Executive Director, Minnesota Elementary School Principals Association*

**Key Accomplishments  
in Early Childhood**

Historically, Minnesota has been a friendly environment for seeding innovation in early childhood, mostly through support of the foundation and business community and a relatively consistent level of investment of state dollars. For example, the Minnesota Early Learning Fund is a five-year time limited think tank of business leaders, operated for the purpose of determining the most effective ways to get children ready for kindergarten. The fund piloted a quality rating system, helped shape messages, and

built awareness and momentum for investing in the early years. “There was a groundswell of

**Her commitment to early learning is personal — as a child she benefited from being enrolled in Head Start and now as an adult reflects on the different trajectory that she has had in life as compared to an older sibling who did not have the same opportunity.**

interest with more and more people seeing the connection between early childhood and elementary education,” said Avisia Whiteman, early childhood staff member at the Minnesota

Department of Education (MDE). So when Commissioner Cassellius took office, the environment was ready for new leadership to embrace and grow efforts to ensure children are ready for entry to school. "Brenda stepped right up to the plate," said Barbara Yates, executive director of Think Small. The early learning community saw a strong advocate in Cassellius; and the schools bought into her commitment to reducing the achievement gap, beginning with investing in the early years. Some say that the stars were lining up for good things to happen.

It helped that Governor Dayton, a former teacher, was an advocate for early childhood and was committed to using policy levers to advance reform. During his campaign, he spoke repeatedly about the importance of the early years and the need to acknowledge that kids do a lot better in k-12 when they have quality early learning opportunities. "Governor Dayton is an amazing advocate for early childhood. He said the time is now and we were going to move forward with a focus on early learning. Within days of his taking office, I was already meeting with early childhood advocates, key stakeholders, and legislators," said Cassellius. But with a republican controlled legislature and a \$5 billion state deficit looming, the opportunities to invest new state funds in early childhood were unlikely. Nevertheless, Governor Dayton empowered Cassellius to lead system-wide change to ensure quality education for all of Minnesota's young children. "It was a big change. The last time the state had invested new money in early childhood was years ago. So having a governor speaking out for early childhood and then his charging Brenda with doing it was a big, big deal," said Yates.

In her first year, Commissioner Cassellius set forth an education agenda that emphasized the importance of the early years, worked

strategically to create structures that would support collaboration, focused on alignment, and took advantage of every opportunity to apply for federal funding that would enable many of the state's promising pilot efforts to grow.

## 7-point Plan for Excellence in Education

While as a candidate Governor Dayton spoke of the importance of educating every child in Minnesota, it was after the campaign when Commissioner Cassellius took the helm of the MDE that a real education plan took shape. "I knew that the governor wanted jobs, jobs, jobs and a better educated citizenry to work those jobs. To achieve that, we had to educate, educate, educate," said Cassellius. "And the governor and I both knew that meant closing the achievement gap by providing quality early learning opportunities." She met with key stakeholders outside government and with her own staff to gather ideas for a concise plan for educating Minnesota's children that would yield the outcomes they wanted and not require new resources, given the state's fiscal predicament. "It all started to coalesce around a common vision for

**The plan's focal point is closing Minnesota's persistent achievement gap through elements such as continuing funding for pre-k programs; increasing all-day kindergarten; building a comprehensive pre-k through 12 system; implementing school readiness standards; launching a statewide literacy campaign; creating the OEL; and reconstituting the Children's Cabinet and Early Learning Council.**

children that starts with high-quality early learning to ensure school readiness," said Cassellius. After just one month on the job, the governor and Cassellius launched the 7-point Plan for Excellence



in Education that “takes what is good in our state and makes it better,” said Cassellius. The plan integrates early learning throughout, sending the signal that it is not just an add-on, but integral to the overall success of public education. The plan’s focal point is closing Minnesota’s persistent achievement gap through elements such as continuing funding for pre-k programs; increasing all-day kindergarten; building a comprehensive pre-k through 12 system; implementing school readiness standards; launching a statewide literacy campaign; creating the OEL; and reconstituting the Children’s Cabinet and Early Learning Council.

“We were thrilled that the 7-point plan has such a strong focus on the early years. From pre-k to all day kindergarten, reading by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and assessments for measuring student growth, it’s all good. In fact, we’d wanted to focus on a growth model for years and now we were really going to do it,” said Storti.

### Structures that Support Advances in Early Learning

Cassellius knew that a first step in making early childhood a visible priority was to create (or re-invigorate) structures for collaboration within MDE, across departments, and in collaboration with the early childhood, public education, business, and foundation communities. Creating several levels of linkage meant that many would own the responsibility for advancing early learning. While ownership would be shared, Cassellius was held accountable. “Governor Dayton said that I needed to take the lead; I needed to be responsible and accountable for the early learning years and tie it to formal education. With great power comes great responsibility, and I take that responsibility personally,” said Cassellius.

**Office of Early Learning.** Prior to the Dayton administration, the legislature created a task

force to make recommendations on an office that would focus on children from birth to third grade and coordinate 32 separate early childhood funding streams across 3 state agencies. While the task force recommended a separate agency where all early childhood programs would live, the reality was such a change would be too costly to implement. Building upon the concept however, the governor and Cassellius created the OEL in MDE, an entity without walls that provides space for collaboration on early childhood issues between the Departments of Education, Health, and Human Services. “It is to be a coordinating point for early childhood organizations and policy, both internally and externally,” said Whiteman. Cassellius then recruited Karen Cadigan, a well-known early childhood researcher and policy expert from the University of Minnesota as the first director of OEL. Cadigan has direct authority over the early childhood programs in MDE, and works closely with her peers in leadership positions in health and human services to support related programs in the other departments. “The OEL doesn’t have a formal governance structure; it’s more about an innovative management approach and a set of relationships that make everything work,” said Cadigan. Thus far, the relationships

**“It works because we all support the strategic role of government in promoting better early learning outcomes for all children. We are sharing power and ideas across traditional silos at the levels of governor, commissioners, and executive teams. It’s about horizontal and vertical coordination. It’s a lovely solution and people are really happy with it. Folks are coming out of the woodwork to pitch in and help.”**

are solid and early wins (e.g., their successful application for the Race to the Top Early

Learning Challenge) are giving the OEL momentum to coordinate services to maximize resources and bolster outcomes. “It works because we all support the strategic role of government in promoting better early learning outcomes for all children. We are sharing power and ideas across traditional silos at the levels of governor, commissioners, and executive teams. It’s about horizontal and vertical coordination. It’s a lovely solution and people are really happy with it. Folks are coming out of the woodwork to pitch in and help,” said Cadigan.

To complement the new OEL, Governor Dayton reactivated and reinvigorated two additional high-level collaborative structures. He reestablished the Minnesota Early Learning Council through an executive order shortly after taking office. This 30 member council meets the requirements of the Head Start Act of 2007 and focuses on policy recommendations to ensure children enter school ready to learn. The governor also reactivated the Children’s Cabinet as a formal structure for the commissioners of education, health, and human services to work together on behalf of children from birth to age 18. He appointed Commissioner Cassellius as chair of the cabinet.

### Pre-K to Grade Three Alignment

The concept of alignment of early childhood and primary grade education had been volleyed around in Minnesota for some time. Several private sector funders — including the Target Corporation, the United Way, and the McKnight Foundation — had made “age three to grade three” a priority. The idea is to link standards, curricula, assessments, data, and professional development across varied early care and education programs, and kindergarten to grade 3 schooling. But Cassellius elevated the importance of alignment as a strategy for

closing the achievement gap and took practical steps to move it from concept to reality.

“She wanted school leaders to think harder about children before entry to kindergarten and work with early childhood programs to build early literacy skills so children don’t start school already behind,” said Yates.

**“One of the things Commissioner Cassellius did right away was elevate the importance of conversations between school districts and pre-k programs about alignment.”**

“One of the things Commissioner Cassellius did right away was elevate the importance of conversations between school districts and pre-k programs about alignment,” said Gayle Kelly, executive director of the Minnesota Head Start Association. “She made it perfectly clear that the elementary school principals were to connect with the early childhood providers in the community and start a conversation,” said Storti.

Cassellius and the early learning team organized a stakeholder meeting on alignment and brought in experts from Massachusetts and Maryland to provide their perspectives. “We looked at different kinds of alignment — horizontal and vertical. It was really exciting,” said Kelly. “Brenda was a visible participant and active learner,” said Kristie Kauerz, one of the keynote speakers and a national expert on the pre-k through 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade movement. Most districts sent teams of people with someone on the team having an early childhood focus. The next day they met in smaller groups with the department and talked about assessment systems and what pre-k through 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade assessments would look like.

In addition, the Minnesota Elementary School Principals Association and 13 other organizations organized a summit on pre-k to 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade

alignment. About 800 people participated in the summit — 250 on site and the rest connected via a live stream in 10 remote areas. “We asked the department to be part of the summit as the governor’s 7-point plan so clearly articulates the importance of early childhood. Brenda came and talked about what the department would do to support alignment,” said Storti. “We used it as an opportunity to talk about how early childhood programs and local principals can work together more deliberately to ensure children are ready for school,” said Cassellius.

Beyond orchestrating and participating in meetings, Cassellius did several practical things to help advance alignment. First, staff revised the early learning standards and helped providers see how the standards link to the expectations for kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade education. Second, she is implementing an incentive for schools to focus on early literacy to ensure children are proficient in reading by the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. The Reading Well by Third Grade program calls on all schools to develop a literacy plan that includes knowing where each child is in the development of their reading skills and how they progress from year to year. Department staff are out in the districts providing presentations on early literacy and meeting with principals to help them develop literacy plans. Third, she created several task groups that are looking at possible legislative changes including but not limited to making better use of funding streams for more integration and alignment.

### **Securing Federal Funding to Advance Early Learning Reforms**

Governor Dayton and Commissioner Cassellius are not letting any opportunity for funding pass them by. “He made it very clear that if there was another round of Race to the Top, we would be applying for it. We did. Folks came together

and worked on that application even during a lengthy state government shut-down, due to an impasse about the state budget. And we really hit a home run. We were fortunate to get funding for the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge, Promise Neighborhoods, and Investing in Innovation (I3),” said Cassellius.

All three new funding streams are enabling the state to expand small pilot efforts and jumpstart work in new areas essential for creating a coherent early childhood system that links purposively to elementary education. These new funding streams will be used to provide scholarships to more children for high quality pre-k; to focus on quality including extending the pilot quality rating system and enhancing professional development opportunities; to grow the kindergarten assessment study and launch a pilot; and to create a statewide longitudinal data system that will track kids beginning in early childhood and follow them through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. In addition, the state will be looking at child outcomes data across funding streams and how data can be used to help every child succeed. “These resources will enable us to move forward on a pathway that many have been grooming for years,” said Cadigan.

The structures created by Cassellius and the deep relationships within the department and with the larger funding community served all well in the crunch period when applying for funding. As its first task, the Children’s Cabinet, which Cassellius chairs, responded to the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge announcement. “The Office of Early Learning provided a touch point for coordination of the application and allowed us to move ahead,” said Whiteman. The OEL cross-department writing team drafted portions of the proposal and gave regular updates to the Children’s

Cabinet and the Early Learning Council. The United Way was a huge help too. They hired a grant writer, created a website for feedback by the community, and hosted a statewide web conference. "The community was really able to coalesce. We were able to align efforts and resources around what should happen to advance early learning systems. We did this with the spirit of collaboration for Minnesota's children," said Cassellius. According to Cadigan, "If we didn't already have a strong foundation of relationships and a shared vision, no way could we have pulled it off in six weeks."

**"...if we do this right, four years from now we will have a clear sense of what to do to transform lives in all 87 counties. I feel 100 percent sure we will have more quality child care. More families will be able to have access. More public preschools for four year olds. More all-day kindergarten. More focus on measuring outcomes and improved screening systems. And we're building a career lattice so early childhood providers can advance their own careers..."**

"At the end of the process of writing the proposal, Brenda wanted to know if we were competitive. She relished the idea that the exercise brought the three departments together to develop a common agenda and a common plan for early childhood. She said that whether they get the money or not, it's a plan that can be implemented," said Yates. At the same time, as Cadigan notes, "Given limited resources, doing systems work sometimes means you can't do all the direct service that you want in the short term. It is heart wrenching. In some communities you just want to invest in expanding programs immediately and deeply. But if we do this right,

four years from now we will have a clear sense of what to do to transform lives in all 87 counties. I feel 100 percent sure we will have more quality child care. More families will be able to have access. More public preschools for four year olds. More all-day kindergarten. More focus on measuring outcomes and improved screening systems. And we're building a career lattice so early childhood providers can advance their own careers and do it in ways that benefit the kids' learning too."

Cassellius recognizes the importance of the opportunity presented by these new funding streams and is working through the OEL to make sure there is alignment between Race to the Top, I3, and Promise Neighborhood "to be good stewards of the funds and get the outcomes Minnesota kids deserve." Moreover, she views these projects and funding as a strategic opportunity to promote a unified commitment to ambitious outcomes for young children in Minnesota:

"Four years from now I hope to see a high functioning Early Learning Council that provides one voice for an aligned, coordinated system to support learning from 0 to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade; more early learning opportunities of high quality; 75 percent of our children ready for kindergarten; and every child reading on grade level by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. These would be tremendous outcomes."

## Leadership Strategies

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As a relatively new commissioner, Cassellius has demonstrated strong leadership to raise hope that the early childhood community and the public schools can work together to ensure all kids are ready for school and eradicate the achievement gap. Her approach to this work is

worth noting: she has focused on making early childhood a visible priority, has strengthened existing relationships that are key for advancing early childhood, and has hired smart staff and given them the support they need to excel.

**Cassellius is making early childhood a visible priority.**

“This idea that people pay attention to my every word is the hardest to get used to. I’m a normal person of modest means. I put on my pants one leg at a time. Yet I realize that as a chief, every word I say can change policy, priorities, and programmatic direction. I need to be ever so strategic and thoughtful about what I say — and what I don’t say — because it sends a message,” said Cassellius.

From including early childhood so prominently in

**“I never talk to a group without mentioning early childhood. In the first year, I’ve been to over 52 districts to talk about early childhood. I spend lots of time talking about resource allocation with the superintendents — about the importance of investing in people, quality teachers, including pre-k teachers.”**

the 7-point plan to establishing formal structures to ensure better coordination of state investments in the early years, Cassellius is continuously highlighting early childhood as a priority and essential strategy for ameliorating the achievement gap. “I never talk to a group without mentioning early childhood. In the first year, I’ve been to over 52 districts to talk about early childhood. I spend lots of time talking about resource allocation with the superintendents — about the importance of investing in people, quality teachers, including pre-k teachers. Actually, this year our teacher of the year is a pre-k teacher,” said Cassellius.

Close observers of her leadership agree. “She doesn’t cite research; she’s not wonky. It’s all values-based and what she thinks is the right thing to do,” said Cadigan. “Lots of leaders talk the talk but aren’t able to walk the walk. Brenda

**“My goal is that early childhood will be something that everyone owns. It needs to be a priority for everyone. So no matter who the governor, who the commissioner, what the composition of the legislature, all will share a commitment to increasing opportunities for high-quality early learning for all Minnesota children.”**

walks and she’s getting her staff to walk with her,” said Storti. In making early childhood a priority, she is also reframing the role of the state away from compliance monitoring to providing supports so the schools can do the best job possible in working with early childhood to ensure kids start school ready to learn. In doing this, many say she is changing the culture of the department.

**Cassellius is building upon and strengthening relationships.**

“My goal is that early childhood will be something that everyone owns. It needs to be a priority for everyone. So no matter who the governor, who the commissioner, what the composition of the legislature, all will share a commitment to increasing opportunities for high-quality early learning for all Minnesota children,” said Cassellius.

Cassellius understands that real change will come when the vision and work of quality early learning is shared by many. From working with her staff in MDE to working with her colleagues in the Departments of Health and Human Services, she is continuously building relationships to benefit Minnesota’s children. Outside government, she is devoting significant



energy to working with superintendents. “Superintendents are your number one lever for change. We can’t discount the amount of leverage they have. We need to inspire them to act in support of quality early childhood. I don’t need lots of legislation if I can inspire and

**“Superintendents are your number one lever for change. We can’t discount the amount of leverage they have. We need to inspire them to act in support of quality early childhood. I don’t need lots of legislation if I can inspire and engage the superintendents and school boards.”**

engage the superintendents and school boards,” said Cassellius. She is building relationships with the early childhood community too. “Brenda has brought a huge amount of energy to the early childhood community. They are thrilled to have her leadership,” said Whiteman. And she is setting up more working groups and task forces than the state has seen in a while. She is bringing clusters of people together to work on specific areas — peer licensure, teacher evaluation, bullying, etc. All seem to think real change will

**“My approach is to build teams of smart people who are passionate that kids matter most and then get out of the way,” said Cassellius. “I need to keep feeding them, protecting their time, and giving them autonomy.”**

happen because of Cassellius’ leadership, the relationships she is building, and the ownership that is solidifying around early childhood.

**Cassellius is hiring people who have strong expertise in early childhood and providing them support.** “My approach is to build teams of smart people who are passionate

that kids matter most and then get out of the way,” said Cassellius. “I need to keep feeding them, protecting their time, and giving them autonomy. It’s like when I was a superintendent. I took the political flack so that the principals and teachers could focus on teaching and learning. It’s the same now. I’ll deal with the politics so that they don’t become a barrier or distraction to the real work that needs to happen.” Those working for her find this truly liberating. “She loves to empower people. She doesn’t want to control us or limit our thinking,” said Cadigan. Cassellius finds a way to stay out of the way while still staying engaged. Her staff appreciates that she responds to email in 24 hours and that she has monthly brown bag lunches and will engage in any conversation important to those attending. “She is constantly giving out her cell phone number and telling staff and superintendents not to hesitate using it,” said Cadigan. They feel supported to get good work done.

## Lessons for Other States

So what can Cassellius’ early experiences in Minnesota teach other chiefs?

1. **Build on the efforts that are already underway in your state, while taking advantage of new opportunities.** The foundation and business community worked diligently in recent years to create pilot programs that enhanced capacity for quality early learning. They also worked to increase awareness about the importance of early childhood. Cassellius recognized the value of building on the previous work and elevating it to new heights. No time was spent reinventing the wheel; energy was devoted to expanding what was already there and taking promising ideas and giving

them legs. She and the governor seized the opportunity to position Minnesota to take advantage of new federal funding opportunities in a period when new state funding to expand early childhood programs was not a feasible option.

**2. Engage your colleagues at the state level in setting a common vision for**

**early childhood and building structures that will support the work to achieve the vision.** No one agency can go it alone; respectful, active participation of all partners is key. Collaboration is essential for maximizing effectiveness, minimizing duplication, and building a shared commitment to ensuring all children in the state enter school ready to learn.

### A Final Word

“For me, it’s an economic and a moral argument. Demographics are shifting and there will be more kids at risk. The achievement gap is unacceptable and must be addressed now. It’s just obvious that the earlier we start the better prepared the children will be for success in school. If not, the quality of life we want for our children will not be reached. But beyond that, every child ought to have the same chance for success. It’s not right that only some kids get a B+ opportunity and lots get a D-. It’s unfair that children are born into circumstances that prohibit them from getting the quality education that will enable them to reach their dream.” *Brenda Cassellius*

### Key Dates

<b>December 31, 2010</b>	Governor Dayton nominated Brenda Cassellius to be commissioner of education.
<b>February 2011</b>	7-point Plan for Excellence in Education is released.
<b>June 2011</b>	Stakeholder conversation on alignment organized by MDE.
<b>August 2011</b>	Pre-k to 3 <sup>rd</sup> -grade summit organized by the Minnesota Elementary School Principals Association, the United Way, and 12 other partners.
<b>August 2011</b>	Office of Early Learning officially opens with Karen Cadigan as the first director reporting directly to Commissioner Cassellius.
<b>December 2011</b>	Promise Neighborhood award made to the Northside Achievement Zone in North Minneapolis.
<b>December 2011</b>	Minnesota’s Investing in Innovation (I3) program officially qualifies to receive funding from the U.S. Department of Education.
<b>December 2011</b>	Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Fund Proposal is awarded to Minnesota.

## Lessons for Chiefs

In 2009, the Council of Chief State School Officers' Early Childhood Task Force published *A Quiet Crisis*, a report that calls out the benefits of ensuring America's young children have access to high-quality early learning opportunities that lay the foundation for later social and academic success. Chiefs know all too well how costs compound when these opportunities aren't available — from children starting school behind, to diverting resources to remediation, to dropout rates fueled by students' lack of confidence and basic skills. To fully realize the potential of investing early to prevent achievement disparities, *A Quiet Crisis* set forth a

**Chiefs know all too well how costs compound when access to high-quality early learning opportunities isn't available — from children starting school behind, to diverting resources to remediation, to dropout rates fueled by students' lack of confidence and basic skills.**

vision for chiefs working in partnership with the early learning community to build coherent state systems of early childhood services, ensure quality programs, and align and fully integrate early childhood with public education so every child can start school poised for success.

This report — *Confronting the Quiet Crisis* — profiles six chiefs in five states who transformed opportunities for young children by facilitating change in a variety of fiscal and political settings. Their efforts show how chiefs can use their position as central architects of education reform to advance quality early learning opportunities.

Reflecting on his role as chief in Arkansas and Kentucky, CCSSO Executive Director Gene Wilhoit said, "Early childhood education was the best

investment I could make." Clearly Nancy Grasmick, Sandy Garrett, Bill Librera, Lucille Davy, Deborah Gist, and Brenda Cassellius share his conviction. They

**"As chief, you have direct access to superintendents, principals, teachers' associations, state and local school boards, the governor, legislators, and the media. This is what makes the leadership role of chiefs so unique. No other position gives you so many ways to set priorities and move an agenda for change."**

understand the economic and moral imperative to ensure all American children reach their fullest potential. And their actions helped to move their states to invest in evidence-based early childhood programs that address the achievement gap, and help more children enter school ready to learn.

Each of the chiefs highlighted in this report took major and meaningful steps to elevate the importance of the early years:

- Grasmick built a single unit in the Maryland Department of Education to manage child care, pre-k, and early childhood special education; and she created a statewide kindergarten assessment system to better target state interventions and inform kindergarten teachers and early learning providers;
- Garrett positioned Oklahoma as the first state to offer universal high-quality pre-k through the state funding formula;
- Librera developed a continuous improvement strategy to document and enhance the quality of all early learning settings in the New Jersey Abbott districts — those operated by the schools, as well as those operated by community providers;

- Davy worked to include pre-k in the school funding formula and to enhance partnerships between the New Jersey Department of Education and Head Start;
- Gist embedded early childhood in Rhode Island’s education reform plan, and garnered new resources for early childhood from the legislature and the federal government; and
- Cassellius built Minnesota’s Office of Early Learning to foster coordination of policies and programs for young children and led forums to convene school administrators and early childhood program leaders to initiate new partnerships.

**These 6 chiefs used their influence and creativity to advance changes in early childhood, even though it is an arena in which responsibility is shared with other state, federal, and private sector leaders.**

What is different about these six chiefs? They stepped outside of the confining leadership box of kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup>-grade schooling. They used their influence and creativity to advance changes in early childhood, even though it is an arena in which responsibility is shared with other state, federal, and private sector leaders. As Wilhoit notes, “There is always the question of how to give appropriate attention to early childhood when responsibility is segmented. You wonder, ‘What role should I play in all of this?’” Though Head Start and child care often are not under the direct purview of the chief, these six seized every opportunity to move a comprehensive agenda to expand access and elevate quality across all forms of early care and education. They didn’t get stuck on who should do what or who received credit. They worked to

persuade players who were not obliged to play ball to join coalitions across public and private sectors. As such, no chief did the work alone. They relied on qualified staff in their departments, relationships with the early learning community, principals, superintendents, governors, legislators, and private sector executives.

With unfaltering determination they showed the multiple pathways chiefs can use to make a difference for quality early learning opportunities:

- They are key opinion leaders who can make the case for including early childhood as an integral element in education reform;
- They manage agencies with direct responsibility for major early childhood programs including pre-k, early childhood special education, and other varied initiatives;
- They can partner with key heads of state human service, health, and other agencies who can work together to harmonize early childhood program standards, assessments, data systems, and professional development efforts across all publicly-funded early care and education programs; and
- They have the ear of the governor and state legislators and can make the case for increasing investment to seed innovation and provide stable, secure funding streams for quality early learning programs.

## Strategies to Confront the Quiet Crisis

Taken together, the stories in this report illustrate eight key leadership strategies chiefs can undertake to elevate the importance of learning in the early childhood years. The strategies can be viewed as a set of intersecting circles of

influence, beginning with the personal leadership of the chief, expanding to their management oversight of their department, and then to

**All eyes and ears are on the chief. When chiefs consistently talk about early childhood, they send a message to those within public education and early childhood circles that the early years deserve real attention**

opportunities to persuade and partner with other influential leaders and audiences.

### **1. Talk About the Importance of Early Childhood Education and Integrate Early Childhood into the Broader K-12 Vision**

All eyes and ears are on the chief. When chiefs consistently talk about early childhood, they send a message to those within public education and early childhood circles that the early years deserve real attention. “I never talk to a group without mentioning early childhood,” said Cassellius. “The power of suggestion is enormous,” notes Wilhoit.

As chiefs talk about early childhood, they can support their position with a variety of appeals, evidence, and arguments. “I felt it was my role to help people understand it’s not a frill or funding playtime,” said Grasmick. Cassellius cites her personal experience as a “Head Start baby.” Showcase the research on brain development. Help people understand the role early childhood experiences play in promoting literacy and ameliorating the achievement gap. Use the bully pulpit to drive home the evidence-based message that investments in early learning will mean less spending on remediation and a more engaged and productive citizenry in the long term. “I

needed to be a tireless advocate because there were always arguments about money and priorities, and I needed to stand firm for investments in early childhood,” said Librera.

The old adage that action speaks louder than words is true here too. Yes, chiefs need to speak out intelligently and passionately about early childhood, but they also need to move beyond rhetoric. Build it in at every opportunity – strategic plans, policy documents, legislation, agency budgets, agency administration, standards, and the like. “Make it a real priority and a core part of the education plan,” said Gordon MacInnes, from the New Jersey Department of Education. Governor Dayton and Cassellius certainly did when embedding early childhood in Minnesota’s 7-point plan for excellence in education. The same is true with Gist and her strategic plan, *Transforming Education in Rhode Island*.

### **2. Hire and Support Strong Early Childhood Experts in State Departments of Education**

Chiefs need to hire staff who are true experts in early childhood, who know what quality looks like, and who are respected and connected with key early childhood leaders, organizations, and

**Chiefs need to hire staff who are true experts in early childhood, who know what quality looks like, and who are respected and connected with key early childhood leaders, organizations, and advocates for young children.**

advocates for young children. They need to position early learning staff and units within the department so that they are on par with leadership in elementary and secondary education and can ensure that early learning

becomes part of all major reform initiatives and policy efforts. And then chiefs need to give staff latitude to do their jobs.

Garrett's success in advancing early childhood issues in Oklahoma over two decades was viewed as a team effort, based on her strong working relationship with Paul. People in the state knew that on early childhood issues, Paul spoke for Garrett. Similarly, in Minnesota, Cassellius states it like this, "I can stay out of the way while also staying engaged, making sure they have the resources they need, and sending the signal that the work matters. I need to keep rewarding, feeding, giving them resources, taking away barriers, and protecting their time so they can get the work done." Cardigan agrees, "An amazing thing about Brenda is that she has a way of bringing in good people and letting them figure things out. She loves to

**On other occasions, chiefs help their early childhood leaders succeed by stepping in to take the heat.**

empower people. She gave us a high level of importance and authority and expected that we would do our job well." According to Grafwallner, the same was true in Maryland, "Nancy would provide guidance and then step back, check in, and offer support as needed."

On other occasions, chiefs help their early childhood leaders succeed by stepping in to take the heat. "Bill had my back. I went to him when there was a problem and he helped me think through challenges," said Frede. "Nancy gave us cover when we encountered problems," said Grafwallner. From dealing with internal politics, to working with unions or the legislature, chiefs can shield their staff from challenges that all too often can become an overwhelming distraction and derail the real

work at hand to bolster quality early learning efforts within the context of education reform.

### **3. Engage School Boards, Superintendents, and Principals**

Chiefs find it is especially important to convince local superintendents to make early childhood a priority. Cassellius notes, "Superintendents are your number one lever for change." Stated Wilhoit, "When you get superintendents advocating for early childhood, it's all possible. I remember a year when early childhood was the top budget priority of the Kentucky State Association of Superintendents. That's when I knew we had really made a change. They became invested because they could see that children who came to school through good early childhood programs had a stronger set of skills for learning than other children."

Beyond working with the superintendents, chiefs can work directly with principals, teachers' organizations, and local school boards to increase awareness about the benefits of early learning and the benefits of partnering with early childhood to uplift school readiness. A simple way to do this is to put early childhood on the agenda for conferences so that all the key players in the school district take part in "Early Childhood

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101" training and more advanced sessions to stimulate ideas for meaningful alliances and alignment efforts. Another method is to create opportunities for superintendents and principals



to visit other districts and schools that have taken the leap into early childhood and learn first-hand from their experiences.

Further, chiefs can charge superintendents and principals with reaching out to early childhood providers within their community. Pushing school leaders to make these overtures is key, because they can draw in the full panoply of public, private, faith-based, and “kith and kin” providers that nurture and prepare infants, toddlers, and preschoolers for school. For example, chiefs can encourage school leaders to engage the early learning community and

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kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade teachers in conversations about how early childhood is connected to the common core state standards. Forging these respectful, inclusive partnerships at the community level will ultimately create an environment where alignment is understood, embraced, and realized by all those working in early childhood as well as public schools.

#### **4. Support Program Quality Through High Standards, Continuous Improvement, and Adequate Funding**

Chiefs play a pivotal role in the formal adoption of quality standards for children, programs, and professionals in legislation or agency regulations; supporting systems to monitor and motivate

continuous program improvement; and setting funding rates that allow programs to meet high standards, beginning with sufficient resources to recruit and retain well-trained teachers. As their early childhood staff work with other experts and practitioners to define program standards, chiefs

**As their early childhood staff work with other experts and practitioners to define program standards, chiefs can drive the process toward the quality of care that research confirms is needed to influence school readiness.**

can drive the process toward the quality of care that research confirms is needed to influence school readiness.

Garrett, Librera, Davy and their key early childhood manager did not leave anything to chance in their commitment to quality. From its inception in the early 1980s, Oklahoma’s pilot pre-k program came with high standards for teacher training, certification, and small class sizes, and, if funding was limited, Garrett and Paul’s approach was to eliminate classrooms rather than compromise quality. In New Jersey, the Abbott ruling defined all the key parameters of quality and mandated sufficient funding for high quality, full-day services. Librera and Frede then worked with ingenuity and determination to craft an innovative continuous improvement system, including multiple forms of program and child assessment measures; intensive oversight of how monies were expended; master teachers to provide professional development; and an independent, rigorous program evaluation. And because these chiefs were equally committed to funding child care and Head Start programs to provide pre-k services, these quality assurance and enhancement initiatives helped uplift quality throughout the early learning community.

## 5. Create Structures to Support a Cohesive Birth to Grade 3 Continuum

It is important for chiefs to help establish and actively participate in a hub for coordinating policy development across state agencies that manage programs for young children. Such a cross-agency system allows state leaders to work together on initiatives including early learning guidelines; standards for program quality; child and program quality assessments; data systems; professional development; and accountability efforts. Ideally agencies can agree on a single, shared policy to apply to all programs regardless of the source of funding or agency jurisdiction. In other instances, state leaders can cross-walk policies to show how they compare to each other. Equally important are opportunities to build connections between systems and policies for younger children and kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade and beyond. The emergence of

**It is important to have one place where leaders can have a comprehensive view of the early childhood landscape, where they can safely engage in planning to build a cohesive system that is integrated both horizontally and vertically.**

coordinated state early childhood data initiatives exemplifies this movement, where an important goal is to enable information from children’s experiences in different early childhood programs to follow them as they progress through elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education.

Formal structures that support a cohesive birth to grade 3 system vary. In Maryland, when child care was transferred to the Department of Education via an executive order, the early childhood leaders in the department were better able to look at the content of programs across the board and create more effective professional development opportunities and articulation that supported all

programs. In Minnesota, with the development of the Office of Early Learning, partnership and communication were strengthened both within the Department of Education and with the sister agencies of health and human services, key foundations, higher education institutions, and business leaders. Oklahoma’s Partnership for School Readiness is a balanced mix of top state agency officials, citizens, and leaders from the early childhood community and the private sector.

Regardless of the location, it is important to have one place where leaders can have a comprehensive view of the early childhood landscape, where they can safely engage in planning to build a cohesive system that is integrated both horizontally and vertically.

## 6. Build Relationships with Leadership in Sister Agencies

Structures like children’s cabinets and early learning councils can only be as effective as the strength of the relationships among the key partners. Chiefs need to build solid relationships with their state colleagues to reach a common vision and commitment to advancing school readiness. Wilhoit recalls, “I would meet for breakfast on a regular basis with the director of health and human services to make sure we were sharing experiences and

**Structures like children’s cabinets and early learning councils can only be as effective as the strength of the relationships among the key partners. Chiefs need to build solid relationships with their state colleagues to reach a common vision and commitment to advancing school readiness.**

working together.” Those in Rhode Island credit former Chief Peter McWalters for standing by his colleagues to support major new investments in early childhood even when the funds were not

coming to the Department of Education. According to Grasmick, “When you forge a unified group all saying the same thing, change will happen.”

In both Rhode Island and Minnesota, the work to create the Early Learning Challenge Fund proposals stands out as examples of chiefs engaging sister agencies in a shared role. Both Cassellius and Gist were heavily involved in the design of their respective state proposal, but they did not overshadow the involvement of the other state agencies. Gist controlled neither the limelight nor the resources, but instead facilitated a collaborative process so that all entities could be involved in shaping the plan.

Chiefs can support relationship building too by hiring key staff committed to working across silos. In Minnesota, department heads interact in the more formal Children’s Cabinet and Early Learning Council, but their deputies are bound at the hip. From health to child services, Cadigan was in regular communication with her counterparts and developed trust and a shared dependence.

## 7. Engage the Private Sector, Philanthropy, and Media

Involvement with the business community and private philanthropy can open doors for chiefs to advance an early learning agenda. Chiefs can call on the private sector to seed new ideas when state resources are not available. Prior to Cassellius’ appointment, the business community was funding promising efforts including a quality rating system. When applying for federal funds, Cassellius was determined to take the good already happening and make it better. So too with Gist as she partnered closely with Rhode Island Kids Count and elevated some of their earlier efforts around early childhood. Gist also depended on the skilled public relations and marketing expertise of Rhode Island Kids Count to help spread the

message about early learning. And in Maryland and Oklahoma, the business community has been key in raising awareness about the importance of the early years. Ready At Five, the early childhood arm of the Maryland Business Roundtable, became a key resource to the Department of Education, holding school readiness events that attracted business leaders throughout the state. George Kaiser, a wealthy philanthropist in Oklahoma, invested in the first Educare program in Tulsa. Further, he went to the state legislature and offered a 2:1 match to create a pilot program that would provide quality care for children birth through three from low-income families. Other Oklahoma businesses – from retirement homes to insurance companies – are creatively configuring their space to support on-site early childhood programs.

## 8. Increase State Investment and Provide Stable, Secure Funding for Quality Early Learning Programs

Over the past decade, scholars and early childhood advocates have worked tirelessly to build awareness of new research on early brain development, evidence on the return on investment in a variety of early childhood programs, and studies that deepen our understanding of the relationships between different measures of early learning and development and children’s success in school and

**State leaders need to know that not investing in high quality early learning is *not* an option if they are serious about ameliorating the achievement gap.**

beyond. More and more state political leaders are familiar with the call for additional attention to the early years. Chiefs can help their governor and state legislators act on this awareness throughout the lengthy and contentious process of state budgeting. Trade-offs are made daily and state

leaders need to know that *not* investing in high quality early learning is *not* an option if they are serious about ameliorating the achievement gap.

Chiefs can help governors understand that their strong leadership paves the way for creative approaches to advancing early childhood. According to Wilhoit, “In Arkansas, Governor Clinton started the focus on early childhood, and then it was continued with Governor Tucker. Their voice was incredible. It’s important to have the governor make the connection with early childhood. Once they get it, they won’t stop and will be strong advocates.” Wilhoit found that the governors he worked with in Arkansas and Kentucky were willing to take on tough issues — like quality indicators — that the legislature shied away from. Governor McGreevey in New Jersey, Governor Dayton in Minnesota, and Governor Keating in Oklahoma all wanted education to be part of their legacy and so they worked with their respective chiefs to advance reforms. Governor Dayton was so supportive of early learning that he didn’t let a disagreeing legislature assuage his determination to create systems to support more coordinated policy and programming. He used his executive authority on numerous occasions when there were changes he felt were needed that the legislature failed to support.

State legislators are essential allies as well and can pave the way for reform. In Oklahoma, Joe Eddins, a democratic state legislator and former educator, worked over a two-year period to convince his colleagues to secure funding for pre-k within the school funding formula. In Maryland, Grasmick was intentional in working with many in the state legislature to secure support. “Nancy worked with several of us in the state legislature to make sure we understood the value of transferring child care from the Department of Human Services to the Department of Education,” said former Maryland Senator Barbara Hoffman.

As the accounts of Maryland, New Jersey, Oklahoma, and Rhode Island highlight, a key fiscal priority is securing a predictable funding source for early childhood programs. As Librera notes, “If I was to give one piece of advice to other chiefs, I’d

**Chiefs need to think creatively to identify opportunities for expanding state investments in the current fiscal crisis for the vast majority of states.**

tell them to think about how you could get the governor to agree to provide a predicted level of support for early childhood over an extended period of time. When you don’t know what resources will be on the table, it wreaks havoc. You need the predictable support so that you can sit, reason, think, plan, and move forward thoughtfully.” Gist agrees, “I felt it was important to include pre-k in the funding formula in order to have a regular, predictable funding stream for this important program.”

Chiefs need to think “outside the box” to identify opportunities for expanding state investments in the current fiscal crisis for the vast majority of states. Few chiefs will have a state supreme court like New Jersey that demands quality early learning opportunities for economically challenged children and spells out core dimensions of quality. Nor will states have a willing legislature that embraces the idea of building pre-k into the school funding formula, as was the case in Oklahoma and Maryland. And not all states are able to create an integrated birth through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade early childhood system by drawing down significant new federal resources as Minnesota and Rhode Island did. Chiefs must seize every opportunity to make the case for increased investment from federal, state, local and private sector sources to expand and improve the quality of early learning programs.

In closing, from Grasmick to Garrett, Librera, Davy, Gist and Cassellius we see how chiefs can expand their leadership of education reform to encompass early childhood. When they do this we see how they can enhance the quality of early childhood programs, expand access, and help more children come to school ready to learn. Grasmick and Garrett show the cumulative fruits of 20 years of sustained effort. Librera and Davy show how from one chief to the next they “kept the ball moving down the field.” Gist and Cassellius show how new leaders can take a legacy of existing efforts to the next level in a short time.

Some worked for republican governors and state legislatures, while others worked for democrats. Some had all early childhood programs under their auspice, others did not. Some were able to mobilize a major expansion of state funding, others coped with diminishing resources. Personal experience guided some, the growing body of research on child development guided others. What they shared was a deep-rooted commitment to ensuring that young children have quality learning opportunities. They took a stand and confronted the quiet crisis head-on.

Finally, their examples show how all chiefs can serve as early childhood champions as they communicate priorities, build internal teams of early childhood experts, oversee quality improvement efforts, support interagency and public-private partnerships and push for more public and private investment. All by themselves, but even more powerfully in concert with other leaders, they can enhance public awareness of the importance of the early learning years, and build genuine and powerful partnerships among diverse early childhood programs, public schools and families of young children. Hopefully these examples will inspire all chiefs to more ambitious and creative leadership to ensure that all young children reach their full potential.

## Contributors

We would like to thank the chiefs, their staff and key partners for providing such rich detail of their work in early childhood.

**Maryland:** Nancy Grasmick, State Superintendent of Education (1991-2011), along with Ben Carson, Louise Corwin, Rolf Grafwallner, Carol Ann Heath-Baglin, Mariale Hardiman, Barbara Hoffman, Margaret Williams and Linda Zang.

**Minnesota:** Brenda Cassellius, State Commissioner of Education (2011-present), along with Karen Cadigan, Kristie Kauerz, Gayle Kelly, Fred Storti, Avisia Whiteman and Barbara Yates.

**New Jersey:** William Librera, State Commissioner of Education (2002-2005) and Lucille Davy, State Commissioner of Education (2006-2010), along with Tom Dunn, Ellen Frede, Jacqueline Jones, Gordon MacInnes and Laura Morana.

**Oklahoma:** Sandy Garrett, Superintendent of Public Instruction (1991-2011), along with Debra Anderson, Teri Brecheen, Eva Carter, Steven Dow, Joe Eddins, Bob Harbison, Kay Floyd, Erin Nation, Ramona Paul, Ron Peters, Lloyd Snow and Nancy von Bargaen.

**Rhode Island:** Deborah A. Gist, Commissioner of Education (2009-present), along with Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Tony Maione, Michele Palermo, Karen Pucciarelli and Larry Picciarelli.

Tom Schultz, CCSSO Project Director for Early Childhood Initiatives, conceptualized and managed the project and conducted the interviews with Deborah Stark, who wrote the report. Kara Schlosser edited the report. Kelly Hunter was the graphic designer.

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One Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20001-1431  
voice: 202.336.7000 | fax: 202.408.8072