



First Five Years Fund

August 4, 2017

Mr. Joe Conaty
Co-Chair, Agency Reform Taskforce
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20202

Re: *Executive Order 13871, Comprehensive Plan for Reorganizing the Executive Branch*

Dear Mr. Conaty:

The First Five Years Fund is pleased to submit recommendations responding to the Agency Reform Taskforce of the U.S. Department of Education regarding ideas about how best to serve the needs of America's students, families, and educators in striving towards educational excellence and equity. FFYF commends the Administration's interest in improving agency operations and welcomes your invitation to provide ideas for supporting the Taskforce's planning and recommendations to Secretary DeVos. Properly implementing the early learning initiatives and related programs under the Department's charge will amplify the impact of the agency's efforts to promote student success.

Evidence shows that access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education is one of the best ways to support educational excellence and equity, particularly for children from low-income backgrounds. The Department's new organizational structure, activities, staffing and services should prioritize early learning consistent with this evidence, as well as the long-established history of strong bipartisan collaboration and a track record of success. This is reflected in the meaningful elevation of early learning in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and funding for early learning in the FY17 Omnibus. The following recommendations are intended to build upon the Department's work, such that federal policy effectively complements and leverages the innovative early learning initiatives endeavored at the state and local level across the country.

Maintain the Department's Early Learning Work

The Office of Early Learning plays a critical role in coordinating and aligning the agency's early learning work across programs and initiatives, while also doing significant work to effectively bridge early childhood education with K-12 education. This has a tremendous impact on children's school readiness and ensuring that students are on track for



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graduating from high school college- and career-ready. ESSA calls on States and school districts to focus greater attention on the role early learning plays in promoting student achievement and school improvement. ESSA requires district coordination with community based early learning programs, which will improve longitudinal coordination of the whole learning continuum. With increased opportunities to direct funding to early learning initiatives in multiple settings – including charter schools, ESSA promotes state and district flexibility in order to encourage a wide range of early learning initiatives. Maintaining strong leadership at the Department is critical to supporting successful implementation of ESSA, and through it, equipping state and community education leaders with tools to strengthen and expand access to high-quality early learning opportunities.

We recommend that the Department’s revised structure and staffing accounts for ESSA’s early learning focus by dedicating an office or strong leadership to supporting implementation of the law’s early learning provisions. This includes providing technical assistance and support to the field in implementing the programs described above and more. Furthermore, the Office of Early Learning and the Office of Special Education Programs have been strong partners in supporting the success of the infants and toddlers programs under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The Institute for Educational Sciences has also been critical to advancing positive change in the field by supporting relevant data collection and research. Finally, as described further below, the Office of Early Learning should continue to support the Department’s close and vital coordination with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Strengthen Inter-Agency Partnerships and Collaboration

The Department’s new structure should facilitate and support a strong early learning partnership with the U.S Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which includes continuation of the Early Learning Interagency Policy Board’s work. For six years, the Board has led activities to aid State and local partners in using resources effectively and efficiently. This coordination should continue to be lead through the Office of Early Learning. Improving elementary and secondary education outcomes, especially in the nation’s lowest performing schools and for the most at-risk subgroups, will depend on inter-agency collaboration to enhance the quality of early learning and care programs in order to improve kindergarten readiness rates.

Meaningful collaboration between departmental leaders, program directors and other senior staff on efforts to ensure children arrive in elementary school ready to learn will yield significant impact on student outcomes. Early learning programs and efforts that will benefit from the continued partnership of the departments include the



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implementation of the new Preschool Development Grants under ESSA, IDEA Parts B and C, Head Start, Early Head Start and the Child Care and Development Block Grant. This engagement should also include improved data sharing, collaborative research, and shared long-term planning. We understand this engagement must be reciprocal and will urge HHS leaders to adopt a similar commitment to work with the Department.

Prioritize Early Learning Data Collection and Use

Continued support of the development of early learning data systems at the Department will greatly improve instruction, practices, services and policies. Current efforts, such as the Statewide Longitudinal Data System, IDEA data collection and sharing, and technical assistance provided to districts and States, supports research, evidence-based decision-making, and keeps families informed.

Through the Department's important work to improve access to information, families will be equipped to make informed decisions about their child's early learning opportunities. This transparency begins with targeted data collection and is facilitated by the development of cutting-edge tools designed to ensure dissemination of useful information. The Department has played an essential role in supporting State and local leadership in this area. The Department's continued leadership in this work, including further development of Early Childhood Integrated Data Systems, will directly serve to improve learning and developmental outcomes for the nation's youngest learners.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide recommendations for building upon the Department's early learning leadership and work as part of your broader discussions about the agency's structure and focus. We look forward to working with the Department as an ongoing resource to you and the Agency Reform Taskforce. We welcome any questions you have about our comments or other early learning issues the Department is exploring.

Sincerely,

Kris Perry
Executive Director
First Five Years Fund