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Dear Dr. Jones and Dr. Lombardi:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge (ELC); this is a tremendous opportunity for states to improve the quality and continuity of education for young children. While the funds have been designated to focus on children before they reach kindergarten, we believe the ELC also provides a unique opportunity to establish early learning as the foundation for a fully aligned continuum of education from birth through post-secondary.

To do this, we wholeheartedly agree that states' birth-to-five systems must become better organized and of higher quality. However, it is also crucial for states to be intentional and strategic about linking and aligning their birth-to-five systems and programs with Kindergarten through 3rd grade (K-3) education. Doing so ensures that the gains made in early learning settings can be better sustained and achievement gaps can be closed early.

We are excited about the potential of HHS and ED working together to promote alignment of early learning and K-3 as you create guidelines, review proposals, and manage the ELC initiative. We urge you to consider the following ideas to encourage states to develop their birth-to-five systems in a manner that clearly supports alignment with K-3:

Governance, Funding, and Data Efforts

- Regardless of which agency a governor designates to manage a state's ELC effort, require involvement of the state's early childhood advisory council and department of education in planning and support of the planned activities, to encourage appropriate connections with state efforts to improve K-3 education.
- Reward states that include school district superintendents, school board members, elementary school principals, K-3 teachers, or other leadership from K-12 education as key partners in their ELC planning.
- Reward states whose plans involve school districts that currently invest (or have plans to invest) Title I dollars in early learning programs.
- If states plan to use ELC resources to improve the quality and use of data, require states to link early childhood data (e.g., data on young children; early learning programs and program quality; and the early childhood workforce) with longitudinal state education data systems.

Standards, Assessments, and Program Improvement

- Reward states for aligning their early learning and K-3 standards; encourage states to set research-based expectations for children of all ages in all key areas of child development including cognitive (literacy/communications, mathematics, science, and social studies), social, emotional, and physical development.
- As states improve the use of child assessments to improve teaching and learning and report on the overall status of young children, birth to age 5, encourage collaboration with related state efforts to assess children in K-3 classrooms.
- Reward states that build partnerships between early learning and K-3 teachers and administrators to review and make joint plans to act on the implications of data.
- As states develop tools and systems for assessing and improving program quality, reward states that share information from quality rating and improvement systems with elementary schools and school districts, and that extend the use of research-based tools for assessing the quality of instruction, teacher-child interactions, and learning environments into K-3 classrooms.

Professional Development

- Require states to provide an assurance that teachers and principals in the early grades (K-3) will not be barred from participating in professional development programs to improve early learning systems if they can pay their own way using funds outside of the ELC grant.
- Reward states that create systems of professional development that include and engage administrators and teachers from both the early learning system (e.g., program directors, childcare and home visiting staff, pre-k teachers, community providers) and K-12 systems (e.g., elementary school principals, K-3 teachers).
- Reward states that show a commitment to improving their teacher preparation programs and licensure structures to ensure that teachers not only in pre-k but also in kindergarten and the early grades are well prepared to teach young children.

Transitions

- Require states to commit to engaging families in the life of schools including the use of transition and ongoing programs that help families be active partners with their local elementary schools.
- Reward states that recognize the importance of full-day kindergarten and create plans for ensuring that children have access to fully funded full-day kindergarten.

We fully support and applaud your tireless efforts to continue to strengthen systems that support young children's learning and development. We see the Early Learning Challenge as an historic opportunity to bolster the birth-to-five system *while simultaneously* positioning that system to be

strategically aligned with the elementary grades. We would be more than happy to provide additional detail on any of these suggestions.

Again, thank you for all that you do on behalf of children.

Sincerely,

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