



Governor
PHIL BRYANT

Statement before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education

Strengthening Welfare-to-Work with Child Care

Laurie J. Smith, Ph.D.
Senior Policy Advisor
Education and Workforce Development
Office of Governor Phil Bryant

Chairman Rokita, Ranking Member Polis, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for convening today's hearing on Strengthening Welfare to Work with Child Care.

My name is Laurie Smith and I am the Education and Workforce Development Policy Advisor to Governor Phil Bryant in Mississippi. I also serve as the Executive Director of the State Early Childhood Advisory Council. I am a former teacher and I have taught preschool, elementary and pre-service teachers in higher education. It is an honor for me to be here to testify before the subcommittee and share experience of Mississippi on this topic.

"To understand the world, you must first understand a place like Mississippi." That's a William Faulkner quote that I think is relevant to my remarks today. Governor Bryant defines good policy as that which *provides the framework that empowers people to create innovative solutions to the problems at hand*. That's the driving spirit behind our new approach to promoting adult responsibility and self-sufficiency while advancing children's development through high quality child care at the same time.

As you know, many states say they're committed to early childhood as a priority. As for my state, I am very proud to say that Mississippi has developed innovative ways to help its children and their parents to succeed together.

In 2014 our State Early Childhood Advisory Council in partnership with Mississippi Department of Human Services developed what we call the "Mississippi Plan": a **Family-Based Unified and Integrated Early Childhood System** that connects and integrates resources and services for both parents and caregivers and their children. The system is also linked with our Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act State Plan, featuring an online process designed to assess any service gaps that the family may have. You have been provided a description of the state plan in your information packets.

Here is how the Mississippi Plan works:

- Rather than try to bundle all of our children from birth to age five under one system, such as universal pre-k, our approach has been guided by a very simple question: How can we bring to bear all of the resources available within and between organizations necessary to meet the needs of children and their parents? Such an approach has given the state great flexibility in integrating resources and allowed the state to be very nimble in bringing previously fragmented programs and systems together.
- We have also asked ourselves: How can we provide high quality? We have shifted the focus from rating the quality of the environment in childcare centers to assessing children's progress and development. To this end, in Mississippi high quality is achieved

when a childcare center meets the basic requirements to operate as a standard childcare center. In essence, you either have high quality or do not have high quality, and the standard designation is what is required.

- Key to our effort has been to assure that we provide continuity of quality, and that quality is not treated as a discrete event. To this end, we have created a framework for standard childcare centers to achieve the status of a comprehensive childcare center. Such designation is achieved when a childcare center commits to engage in activities necessary to provide continuity of quality as children move from infancy to age five.
- Critical to our innovation has been the use of data to assure continuous quality improvement. Through the creation of one of the most comprehensive longitudinal education and workforce data systems in the country, Mississippi has been able to gauge educational progress from pre-K through age 20 and into the workforce.
- We are using online and mobile technology to improve access and customer experience. We are also using artificial intelligence to leverage and augment staff ability to develop the best individualized plan for children and their parents. To accomplish this, we have engaged our research universities to provide the technical and scientific expertise necessary to apply data science and artificial intelligence to human services.

I am delighted to report that this innovative approach has helped our state make great progress toward providing all of its young children with access to quality early learning and development programs. In addition, Mississippi was one of only two states in the nation to demonstrate significant increases in 2015 NAEP scores for both reading and math subject areas for fourth grade students.¹ In 2013, third grade literacy proficiency was 48 percent; last year, 92 percent of third graders were assessed as proficient in literacy.^{2 3} The 2017 graduation rate reached an all-time high of 83 percent, up from 80.3 percent the previous year. Our state was awarded the Frank Newman Award for Education Innovation by Education Commission of the States and most recently, the Pacesetter State Award by the National Campaign for Grade level Reading.

The origin of the Mississippi Plan dates back to 2007 when the business community raised approximately \$10 million dollars to conduct a pilot designed to determine the needs of childcare centers and how to best help improve the quality of childcare for our most at risk children. As a result of that study, the leadership of the State Early Childhood Advisory Council in partnership with Mississippi Department of Human Services developed a **Family-Based Unified and Integrated Early Childhood System** that connects and integrates resources and services for both parents and caregivers and their children. Our Mississippi Department of Employment Security is a core partner in working with the childcare component, and the system is also linked

¹ http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2015/#?grade=4

² State data from MDE at <http://orsap.mde.k12.ms.us/MAARS/>

³ <http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/communications/2017/05/18/school--and-district-level-3rd-grade-reading-passing-rates-available-for-public-viewingf>

with our Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act State Plan, featuring an online process designed to assess any service gaps that the family may have. You have been provided a copy of the state plan in your additional information packets.

Based on the responses to the online application, parents and children are referred to the appropriate agency for assistance through a common case management system. A unified success plan for the parent and the child is developed. The system focuses on three areas: (1) Early Care and Learning; (2) Health, Mental Health, Safety and Nutrition; and (3) Family Engagement. It aims to serve multiple purposes: promoting adult responsibility and self-sufficiency and advancing healthy child development through high quality child care at the same time.

Parents can redeem vouchers in either a standard child care center or a comprehensive child care center. Research shows that children benefit from high quality child care—not some small percentage of high quality. That’s why Mississippi decided to stop using a quality rating system and instead focus on helping childcare providers through an ongoing improvement process. Comprehensive centers must be able to demonstrate how they will meet the needs of the child from birth to age five as they transition through those ages, while implementing the key components of high quality care (Please see page seven of the additional material provided.)

A key component of the plan is the creation of the Early Childhood Academies at each the 15 Community Colleges. Community Colleges are the core of our workforce system in Mississippi. Early Childhood coaches travel to the centers to provide on-site, professional development and if teachers and directors are interested in attaining higher education, the coaches assist them enrolling in college.

The Mississippi plan is very different than a quality rating system. It is an integrated, interagency service delivery with a quality voucher based on the needs of the child and family. In the past, these agencies and services were all disconnected. Now they are connected—to each other and to the families that need them.

Mississippi was the first state in the nation to submit and receive approval for the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act State Plan. I encourage you to download the *Mississippi Works* app, an award-winning technology that connects job seekers with real time employment opportunities. This initiative helps move people in low skill jobs to opportunity occupations and careers and helps Mississippi college graduates find their dream job in the state

This brief story illustrates how our early childhood efforts work with business and industry:

At a recent visit to Milwaukee Tools, a manufacturing plant in Greenwood, MS, the plant manager told me that he would hire hundreds more employees if he could find more qualified applicants in the community. He stated that he wanted to explore a way to recruit more women to work in the company, but he knew they had childcare needs that were keeping them from applying.

That manager is now in a partnership with our Department of Human Services and planning to open a high-quality child care center at the plant so he can bring in more qualified applicants and meet the needs of providing high quality child care for his employees who are also parents.

We know that family and child well-being are inextricably linked. I think this is an excellent example of how to support parents' work and to advance children's growth and development during their most critical years at the same time.

I would like to point out that Mississippi has created this **Family Based Unified and Integrated Early Childhood System** without any of the "extra" federal grants and funds that have come through in recent years. Although we applied, we were not a recipient of Race to the Top or the Preschool Development grants. Instead, we've made our existing dollars more valuable by using data and technology to do more with less. Technology is helping us to connect resources and people in a way we have never done before, while creating more efficiencies and ensuring program integrity.

My whole career has been about helping children and families. I believe that early childhood education is one of the most crucial areas of policy in the United States today. A key lesson learned is that the plan to help our children cannot be disconnected from the plan to help their parents. Our early evidence shows that a family approach can produce transformational results for our children and our parents. I appreciate your ongoing support of this two-generational strategy that helps adults work and promotes young children's development.