



June 9, 2011

The Honorable Kathleen Sebelius  
U.S. Department of Health & Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20201

The Honorable Arne Duncan  
U.S. Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretaries Sebelius and Duncan:

As early care and learning providers working in schools, centers, and home-based settings and as parents, who rely on early childhood services to work and support their families, SEIU members have a strong stake in early childhood programs. On behalf of our 2.1 million members we thank you for the commitment you have shown to young children through the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge. As you craft The Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge, we urge your Departments design this initiative to prioritize the following recommendations.

### **Improving Quality in Existing Early Childhood Programs in All Settings**

The Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge should strengthen existing services in all types of programs for all age groups, rather than adopting a narrowly targeted approach that seeks to improve quality for a limited number of children while potentially undermining quality and access for others. States should be explicitly required to address quality improvement for existing providers in all settings, including licensed family child care homes and legally license-exempt homes.

We are pleased that these grants seek to target disadvantaged children. We believe that these grants should be designed to promote quality improvement for existing programs in low-income communities, tied to credentialing and improved compensation, rather than primarily shifting children from their current settings into programs that have already achieved high quality. We urge the inclusion of specific language incenting states to focus on quality improvement and increased funding for existing programs serving disadvantaged children and underserved populations, such as infants and toddlers, English-language learners, children with special needs, and families needing care during non-traditional hours.

We further support the language in H.R. 3221 as passed by the House of Representatives on September 17, 2009, requiring that only 25% of grant funds can go towards expanding access to the highest quality programs, and only after the Secretary certifies that the state is making

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sufficient progress in improving quality in existing programs and implementing the other requirements of the grant.

### **Linking Professional Development to Compensation and Supports**

In order to recruit and retain a well-qualified workforce, the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge must encourage states to invest in quality improvement and workforce development for this mostly low-income workforce.

Providers must be supported and rewarded for education, training, and quality improvement through incentives such as stipends, tiered reimbursement, access to health insurance and other programs to improve compensation. States should be required to include tiered reimbursement and/or other financial supports in their Quality Rating Improvement Systems. The grants should include a set-aside, requiring states to use a certain percent of their grant funding for direct support to the workforce for compensation, benefits, and/or professional development supports. Grant applications should require States to lay out a plan to address compensation and turnover issues in their state.

### **Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Scoring Application and Competition**

Parallel to original Race to the Top grants, we recommend that scoring rubric should evaluate provider voice and participation in early childhood policy-making, with maximum credit to states which involve a broad and representative group of early childhood providers in decision-making on a regular basis.

The Early Learning Challenge should be designed to allow a range of states (not just the top-performing states) to access funds to support and improve their systems. States should be allowed to compete wherever they are in the development of their system, as long as they meet some basic requirements and are committed to move forward in making substantial improvements. States that have made such commitments to the care and education of their young children should not be removed from consideration if they have been forced to make tough choices to balance their budgets, in this time of massive state budget shortfalls.

We thank you for your commitment to improving access to affordable, high quality early care and learning services for children and their families through this important proposal and your longstanding support of early childhood providers and working families. We look forward to working with you as you continue to develop this proposal and implement other federal early childhood initiatives.

Sincerely,



Eileen Kirlin

Executive Vice President, Service Employees International