



Early Childhood Education

by Diane M. Drago

"The most important competitiveness program of all is one which improves education in America . . . I'd like to be the Education President." This statement by President George Bush in an address to a joint session of Congress in February 1989 epitomizes the strength of the new cycle of interest Americans have in the education of their children. Since the 1983 publication of A Nation at Risk, we have witnessed an intense national debate on the "quality of education" and a particular interest in the importance of early childhood education. Michigan is no stranger to this debate, and the state legislature currently faces a virtual plethora of school finance reform measures, most of them tied to issues of quality. Early childhood education is part of this issue, as the most recent proposal recommends significant increases for the preschool program established in Michigan last year for "at-risk" four-year-olds. This Commentary provides background information, describes current programs, and suggests a proactive approach to the issue.

OVERVIEW

The perception exists that the current national and statewide interest in early childhood education (ECE) is a new phenomenon, but we are simply witnessing yet another phase in the cycle of interest that ebbs and flows with societal pressures. What is new in the field of ECE is the growth in research since the 1960s that is providing the basis for reshaping our thoughts and initiatives. One fairly consistent indication from this research is the positive influence of ECE on the educational and social development of children. This is particularly relevant to Michigan, given the recent U.S. Department of Education report on the state's poor high school graduation rate and in view of the state's expanding corrections system. Should we not invest in our children early in life, rather than try to contain the mistakes later? The quality of ECE programs also has been addressed in contemporary research, and this is another topic of immediate concern in Michigan in light of the school finance reform debate. It is crucial for parents, educators, and policy makers to understand child development issues and the educational approaches that work best. With that knowledge we then can make wise financial and public policy choices for the future of our children and of society.

As in the past, societal pressures are fueling interest in ECE. The changing face of the U.S. family—more working mothers and more single-parent homes—has increased the need for child care services. Parents are demanding better quality child care, which usually translates into seeking services with an educational component. As was stated in the recent Michigan 4C Association's report, "Good policy will recognize that the child care requirements of families will vary, depending on family structure and supports, the ages and special characteristics of the children, the type of child care sought, and the family's financial status.

Good policy also will recognize that high-quality preschool education is an integral component of high-quality child care services."¹

This *Commentary* is written in the hope that a better understanding of the issues will foster wise, comprehensive public policy decisions on ECE and will encourage parents to make careful and thorough decisions when addressing the educational needs of their young children. The following is *not* a discussion of custodial child care services; rather, it is about the *education* of our young children. To understand the scope of the discussion, we first must understand the concepts of early childhood education and child care. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) defines early childhood as the years between birth and age eight and **early childhood education** as the services provided during these years. Services can be rendered in nursery schools (for children aged two to four) with an emphasis on active learning in a play setting, in preschool (immediately before kindergarten), in kindergarten, and in the primary grades. Usually, these are half-day, educationally oriented programs for children aged two to five (the primary focus here). According to NAEYC, **child care** (or "day care") is primarily custodial but may offer an educational component; it usually refers to primary care for children over long hours of operation designed to meet the needs of working parents.

The controversy lies in the growing overlap between the two concepts and attempts by some to maintain the division. The overlap is obvious. ECE programs, such as Head Start, are concerned about the overall care of children, not just their education, and serve at least part of the child care needs of parents. Likewise, child care facilities do not entirely ignore the educational component. In Michigan, some distinction is maintained by dividing jurisdiction, based primarily on the age of the child, between two agencies. The Michigan Department of Education houses the Office of Early Childhood Education, which has authority for schoolchildren in grades K-3. It acts as a clearinghouse for programs and administers two federal grants: the Handicapped Infant and Toddler program and the Dependent Child Care (or "latch-key") program. The office also administers the state's new preschool program for four-year-olds who are considered at risk of educational failure (see p. 6). The Michigan Department of Social Services (DSS) has regulatory authority for all child care programs for those younger than school age (kindergarten) and is responsible for overseeing child care centers, group day care homes, and family day care homes.

This situation makes it difficult to gather accurate statistics on the number of children actually receiving some type of ECE in Michigan. The Office of Early Childhood Education reports that 8,640 children in Michigan currently are served by the state-sponsored preschool program for disadvantaged four-year-olds, but the patchwork of other public and private ECE programs in the state complicates data gathering. Currently, the DSS reports that it regulates 3,219 day care facilities, 1,015 group day care homes, and 10,366 family day care homes.² These 14,600 facilities have a total licensed capacity of 198,204. While many of them offer some type of learning experiences for the children in their care, at present there is no way to assess accurately the nature of that educational component. Neither DSS nor the Office of Early Childhood Education maintains data on educational services in licensed child care facilities.

At the national level, information is available on the enrollment and attendance status of children in preprimary and kindergarten classes and on the child care arrangements of working mothers. The U.S. Bureau of the Census reports that preprimary school enrollment nationwide grew by 24.8 percent from

¹ Michigan 4C Association, *Child Care in Michigan: A Profile* (Lansing: the Association, 1989), p. 3.

² Accurate data are not available on unregulated child care facilities in Michigan, but the DSS estimates that perhaps only 15-20 percent of the operating facilities are licensed or registered. Public Sector Consultants, *Michigan In Brief* (Lansing: PSC, 1988), p. 58.

1981 to 1986; in the latter year, 6.5 million children were enrolled in U.S. preprimary school.³ (See Exhibit 1 for enrollment data.)

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A brief look at the history of ECE demonstrates that our current interest is not a phenomenon of the 1980s. We continue to attempt a balancing act between the belief that young children are best nurtured at home and the demands of modern society. Prior to the 1800s, few children were enrolled in school in the United States, but the effects of the Industrial Revolution led to a major shift in attitudes. The view that children were an economic resource finally began to change as social reformers led the fight for child labor laws, and interest in the welfare of children coincided with a new enthusiasm for their education.

During the first three decades of this century there was a growing acceptance of government responsibility for the welfare of children. Federal funding for educational and child care programs was minimal, but the seeds for future involvement were being planted. By the 1920s another development had emerged: nursery schools that concentrated on the *education* and development of children, serving primarily as a supplement to the home care of middle- and upper-class parents. Only limited day care services were available to the working poor, a situation that remains familiar today.

Societal needs resulting from the Great Depression and World War II again fueled interest in young children. During the war many mothers entered the work force, and the focus shifted to government-supported child care, which was provided by the 1942 Lanham Act. When the war ended, it was thought that the great national need for child care no longer existed, and funding all but disappeared. The view that young children should be at home with their mothers once again resurfaced.

Many current developments originated in the turbulent decade of the 1960s, when there was a huge expansion in child care programs and a new twist was added in the form of prolific research. The civil rights movement reawakened awareness of the devastation of poverty, and fears about the Russian launching of *Sputnik* led to a massive growth in federal educational programs. The nurturing of young children became a weapon in the War on Poverty, and monies for child care services to welfare recipients and compensatory programs for the educationally deprived were provided through such legislation as the 1962 amendments to the Social Security Act, the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act, and the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). During this period Head Start was established, and by 1967 the federal government was requiring that regulations and standards be set for child care. In the 1970s these programs were continued and refined. Today, the increasing demands for child care services and educational quality have renewed our interest, and research in recent decades is pointing the way to a revised perspective of ECE.

CURRENT THOUGHT ON ECE

Since the 1960s, research in the field has moved beyond defining ECE and debating its importance to examining such issues as curriculum quality, access, and long-term implications. David Elkind, Professor of Child Study, Tufts University, has written extensively about the nature of ECE today. He asks educators to examine how the pressures of U.S. society are affecting the character of learning in ECE programs, a question that goes to the heart of the cyclical nature of our interest in the education and care of young children.

³ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Report* (October 1988):1.

EXHIBIT 1

Attendance Status for U.S. Nursery School and Kindergarten
Students Aged 3 to 6, by Residence, Age, and Type of School,
October 1986 (in thousands)

| | Total Enrolled | Attending Full Day | |
|------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|---------|
| | | Number | Percent |
| Metropolitan: Inside central city | | | |
| Years of age | | | |
| 3 | 328 | 147 | 44.7 |
| 4 | 600 | 241 | 40.2 |
| 5 | 999 | 473 | 47.4 |
| 6 | 113 | 55 | 49.0 |
| Total | 2,039 | 917 | 44.9 |
| Nursery school | 808 | 348 | 43.0 |
| Public | 347 | 143 | 41.2 |
| Private | 461 | 204 | 44.4 |
| Kindergarten | 1,231 | 569 | 46.2 |
| Public | 1,003 | 446 | 44.5 |
| Private | 228 | 123 | 53.8 |
| Metropolitan: Outside central city | | | |
| Years of age | | | |
| 3 | 521 | 183 | 35.2 |
| 4 | 842 | 269 | 32.0 |
| 5 | 1,460 | 432 | 29.6 |
| 6 | 245 | 83 | 33.7 |
| Total | 3,068 | 967 | 31.5 |
| Nursery school | 1,248 | 405 | 32.5 |
| Public | 291 | 90 | 31.0 |
| Private | 957 | 315 | 32.9 |
| Kindergarten | 1,820 | 562 | 30.9 |
| Public | 1,508 | 436 | 28.9 |
| Private | 313 | 126 | 40.2 |
| Nonmetropolitan | | | |
| Years of age | | | |
| 3 | 193 | 70 | 36.1 |
| 4 | 330 | 111 | 33.7 |
| 5 | 698 | 315 | 45.1 |
| 6 | 186 | 89 | 47.9 |
| Total | 1,408 | 585 | 41.6 |
| Nursery school | 498 | 145 | 29.1 |
| Public | 197 | 57 | 29.1 |
| Private | 301 | 87 | 29.0 |
| Kindergarten | 910 | 441 | 48.4 |
| Public | 817 | 398 | 48.7 |
| Private | 93 | 43 | 46.2 |
| Totals | | | |
| Years of age | 6,515 | 2,469 | 37.9 |
| 3 | 1,041 | 400 | 38.4 |
| 4 | 1,772 | 622 | 35.1 |
| 5 | 3,157 | 1,220 | 38.7 |
| 6 | 544 | 227 | 41.7 |
| Nursery school | 2,554 | 898 | 35.2 |
| Public | 835 | 290 | 34.8 |
| Private | 1,719 | 607 | 35.3 |
| Kindergarten | 3,961 | 1,571 | 39.7 |
| Public | 3,328 | 1,280 | 38.5 |
| Private | 633 | 291 | 46.0 |

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Report* (Washington, D.C.: the Bureau, October 1988), p. 19.
NOTE: Civilian noninstitutional population.

Elkind believes that earlier in the century we moved from the concept of the "sinful child" to that of the "sensual child." Freudian psychology and John Dewey's progressivism focused attention on "the development of a 'healthy personality.' . . . During the reign of the sensual child, there was less concern with the child's intellectual development, which, in an emotionally healthy child, was presumed to take care of itself."⁴ Elkind feels that the social movement of the 1960s was "inconsistent with the concept of the sensual child. . . . Early childhood education became a ground on which to fight social battles that had little or nothing to do with what was good pedagogy for children."⁵ Intellect and self-sufficiency began to take precedence over a healthy personality. The economic shift from industry to technology and the changing face of the U.S. family also helped reshape our concept of children—we now want the "competent child." Elkind is not arguing against ECE per se, only the form he sees evolving. He argues vehemently that social, economic, and political pressures have moved us toward inappropriate, structured academics, although research tells us that children learn differently and that formal instruction is psychologically harmful to them.

Others are asking similar questions. "The National Association of Elementary School Principals, International Reading Association, and four other professional organizations recently issued a joint statement of concern about practices in reading instruction prior to the first grade. A NAEYC position paper condemned formal, rigidly structured lessons, teacher-directed activities, and written tasks as inappropriate for four- and five-year-olds."⁶ Yet, in a survey of principals and of kindergarten and first grade teachers, the Oregon Department of Education found that academic skill development is on the rise, while child-selected activities are being reduced. The study revealed some ironic results: "Kindergarten practitioners have adopted practices that most of them consider developmentally inappropriate. Second, though there is substantial agreement on what should *not* be done, commitment to the alternative developmental philosophy is incomplete."⁷

Some of the most interesting ECE research has been done in Michigan, at the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation in Ypsilanti. The foundation grew out of the Perry Preschool program, begun in 1962 under the direction of David Weikart, then director of special education for the Ypsilanti public schools. Through ECE, Weikart hoped to reach children before they developed patterns of educational failure in elementary school. The High/Scope Cognitively Oriented Curriculum is based primarily on Jean Piaget's theories of child development.⁸ "The critical principle of the High/Scope curriculum is that teachers must be fully committed to providing settings in which children learn actively and construct their own knowledge The form of learning is almost exclusively reinforced imitation by the child."⁹ High/Scope trains teachers to guide children through a daily "plan-do-review" cycle of activities designed to emphasize problem-solving and independent thinking.

The Perry Preschool program is significant for two reasons: It was one of the first developed to help poor children overcome the scholastic implications of poverty, and it was one of the first preschool programs to be incorporated into an experimental design that has produced longitudinal studies on the effects of

4 David Elkind, "Formal Education and Early Childhood Education: An Essential Difference," *Phi Delta Kappan* (May 1986):633.

5 Ibid.

6 Randy Hitz and David Wright, "Kindergarten Issues: A Practitioner's Survey," *Principal* (May 1988):28.

7 Ibid., pp. 30-31.

8 Jean Piaget (1886-1980) was a leader in the field of child development. He believed that development is both genetic and environmental and identified four stages of development.

9 David P. Weikart and Lawrence J. Schweinhart, "The High/Scope Cognitively Oriented Curriculum in Early Education," in J.R. Berrueta-Clement and others, *Changed lives: The effects of the Perry Preschool program on youths through age 19*, Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, No. 8 (Ypsilanti: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 1984), pp. 255-56.

ECE. Furthermore, although criticized by some for its small sample, the Perry Preschool study begun in 1961 is considered a landmark in its field. It is following the lives of 123 economically disadvantaged children (65 in the control group and 58 in the Perry program) and trying to determine whether their preschool experience has had a permanent effect; the researchers believe the answer is "yes." The results of the survey conducted when the children were 19 years of age are shown in Exhibit 2. High/Scope researchers now are preparing to survey these students as they turn age 28.

EXHIBIT 2

Key Findings of the Perry Preschool Study through Age 19

| Outcome | Preschool Group % | No Preschool Group % |
|--|-------------------|----------------------|
| Completed high school | 67 | 49 |
| Attended college or job-training programs | 38 | 21 |
| Ever classified as mentally retarded | 15 | 35 |
| Holding a job | 50 | 32 |
| Satisfied with work | 42 | 26 |
| Self-supporting (own and/or spouse's earnings) | 45 | 25 |
| Ever arrested | 31 | 51 |
| Receiving public assistance | 18 | 32 |
| Teenage pregnancy (rate per 100 women) | 68 | 117 |

NOTE: All findings reported here are statistically significant with a probability of error of less than .05 (one-tailed).

SOURCE: Adapted from J.R. Berrueta-Clement and others, *Changed lives: The effects of the Perry Preschool program on youths through age 19*. Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, No. 8 (Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press, 1984), p. 2.

A second important research effort was High/Scope's Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study, launched in 1967 to examine the effects of three preschool curricula: High/Scope, a teacher-directed curriculum, and one described as the traditional nursery school approach. Initially, no significant differences were found; the mean IQ scores of all the children rose, and the gains endured over time. When surveyed at age 15, however, "adolescents from the High/Scope and Nursery School groups each reported engaging in only about *half* as many delinquent acts as the Direct Instruction group. The child-initiated activity groups had far fewer high-frequency offenders, too. . . . Hence, though Direct Instruction strategy appears to be as good as (though not superior to) the two other models in stimulating the intellect, it seems to be less successful at developing young children's social problem-solving skills."¹⁰

Research such as this is beginning to have a profound effect not only on curriculum but also on the preparation of teachers in the field. Teacher training now gives more attention to the psychological and developmental aspects of ECE. At the time of its study, the Oregon Department of Education found that "39 states and the District of Columbia required special certification for kindergarten teachers, and 25 states required kindergarten teachers to have special training in early childhood education Teaching kindergarten is sufficiently different from elementary instruction to warrant specialized training, respondents indicated."¹¹

¹⁰ Lawrence J. Schweinhart, "How Important Is Child-Initiated Activity?" *Principal* (May 1988):7.

¹¹ Hitz and Wright, "Kindergarten Issues," p. 29.

In Michigan, undergraduate students earning a bachelor's degree in education can major in early childhood education. Completion of the program results in a "ZA" endorsement on their Michigan Provisional Elementary Certificate, which certifies that the state's requirements for teachers of grades K-8 have been met. Graduate students also may obtain the ZA endorsement on their provisional or continuing elementary teaching certificate. Field experience as a requirement for ECE majors is increasing.

Noncertification programs also are available for those pursuing careers in child care center teaching and administration, preschools, as a home visitor, or as a family day care provider. A four-year degree in children and family general studies can be awarded without a teaching certificate (for child care center teaching and administration). There is also a Child Development Associate (CDA) program, which credentials people as skilled caregivers to work with children from birth to age five and also with their families. These programs have been developed in recognition of the growing need for and interest in quality child care and ECE.

CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS IN ECE PROGRAMS

Before examining recent developments in ECE, it is useful to know who is being educated in these programs. As of October 1986, approximately 38.9 percent of all three- and four-year-old children in the United States were enrolled in some form of nursery school, and 95.3 percent of all five- and six-year-olds were in school.¹² Exhibit 3 provides additional data on preschool programs in the United States.

Apart from the overall expansion in the size of and interest in ECE programs, a major development during the 1980s has been the increasing role of state government. Partly owing to the reduction in federal spending since the 1960s, this expanded role also is due to several other factors: "the growth of labor force participation of mothers of young children; a proliferation of research findings demonstrating the positive long-term benefits of early childhood education; a dramatic increase in the numbers of children living in poverty."¹³ Almost half the states spend some money on ECE. Approximately two-thirds of the programs are geared toward academically at-risk three- and four-year-olds, but they serve a limited number of children; only California and Texas have statewide ECE programs. Funding for state efforts usually is in the form of grants administered by the state department of education or through standard school finance formulas, although states supplement federal monies, and several require local matching funds. In Michigan the grants process is used primarily to support pilot programs.

The Public School Early Childhood Study, conducted by Bank Street College and Wellesley College from 1985-87, substantiates the interest of state governments in the potential of ECE, especially to benefit disadvantaged children. In a survey of ECE in the public schools, the study found that "state investment . . . has taken one or more of three forms: support of Head Start, provision of parent education, or provision of prekindergarten programs. . . . About two-thirds of the programs are targeted for children at risk."¹⁴ Sixty percent of ECE programs are half-day, and they "are about equally divided between those serving only 4-year olds and those serving children 3-5 years old."¹⁵ Most school districts are not taking child care concerns into consideration, however, and it is disturbing that there continues to be a lack of local coordination among ECE programs and other child care and children's services.

¹² Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Report*, p. 5.

¹³ Terry Gnezda, *State Fiscal Policies for Child Care and Early Childhood Education* (Denver: National Conference of State Legislatures, October 1987), p. 1.

¹⁴ Anne Mitchell, "Public Schools and Young Children: Preliminary Findings from a National Study," in *Shaping the Future for Early Childhood Programs* (Ypsilanti: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 1988), p. 43.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

EXHIBIT 3

Recent Data on U.S. Preschool Programs

Percentage Enrolled, by Age

| | |
|--------------------|----|
| 3- and 4-year-olds | 39 |
| 5- and 6-year-olds | 96 |

Percentage Enrolled, by Family Income

| | Under \$10,000 | Over \$35,000 |
|-------------|-------------------|------------------|
| 3-year-olds | 17 | 54 |
| 4-year-olds | 33 | 67 |

Percentage Enrolled, by Schools

| | Public | Private |
|-------------|--------|---------|
| 3-year-olds | 32 | 68 |
| 4-year-olds | 44 | 56 |
| 5-year-olds | 85 | 15 |

Percentage Enrolled, by Length
of School Day

| | Full Day | Part Day |
|-------------|----------|----------|
| 3-year-olds | 34 | 66 |
| 4-year-olds | 36 | 64 |
| 5-year-olds | 38 | 62 |

Percentage of Kindergarten Programs by Focus

| | |
|---|----|
| Preparation (Academic and Social Readiness) | 63 |
| Academics (Skills and Achievement) | 22 |
| Developmental (Child Development) | 8 |

Meaningful Demographics

| | |
|---|--------------|
| Percentage of 4- and 5-year-olds living in poverty | 25 |
| Percentage of preschoolers' mothers who work | 57 |
| Percentage of children who will live in a single-parent home before adulthood | 40 |
| Number of children under 6 with working mothers, 1985 | 9.6 million |
| Projected number of children under 6 with working mothers, 1995 | 14.6 million |

Largest State Programs

| | | | |
|------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Texas | \$64.5 million | South Carolina | \$10.9 million |
| California | 35.5 million | Massachusetts | 10.3 million |
| New York | 27.0 million | Michigan | 10.0 million |
| Illinois | 12.7 million | | |

SOURCE: *Barbar Day and Tempe Thomas, "Public School Programs for Young Children: Who, Where, What, and How," Principal (May 1988): 26.*

At-risk children also are the focus of the federal government. Its largest and most consistent contribution to ECE is Head Start, begun in 1965 and intended to reach beyond the custodial nature of day care. The program was designed to provide comprehensive health, educational, nutritional, and social services to low-income children, and parental involvement was considered essential to success. Debate continues about the effectiveness of Head Start; critics point to a lack of measurable, continued educational achievement when students move on, whereas supporters focus on the total effect of improved health, nutrition, and social competence. Other programs, such as Follow Through and Even Start, have been initiated to supplement the gains of Head Start and expand on the concept. President Bush's FY 1990 budget proposes a slight increase in Head Start funding, and the U.S. House of Representatives approved a bill on March 21 that would increase the authorization from \$1.405 billion to \$1.552 billion.

From September 1987 through May 1988, 22,958 children were enrolled in Michigan's 34 Head Start programs, which received \$47.6 million in federal funding (\$2 million of which was reserved for services to handicapped children). Grantees may be school districts, governmental units, or community action agencies. Michigan also has initiated a preschool program for four-year-olds at risk of educational failure. Risk factors include low birth weight, long-term illness, language deficiency, and immature development of the child; teenaged, single, or unemployed parent(s); and such family characteristics as low income, substance abuse, history of low school achievement, and lack of a stable support system or residence. Funding goes to public school districts (through the school aid formula) serving children at highest risk and to public or private nonprofit agencies (through competitive grants), including Head Start or private child care centers. Signed into law in August 1988, the program has spent approximately \$17.3 million, and 8,640 children presently are being served. The governor has proposed \$20 million for the program in FY 1989-90.

The U.S. Department of Education funds several programs related to ECE. These include **Even Start**, which awards discretionary grants to local education agencies (funded under Chapter 1, Title I, of ESEA); **formula grants for handicapped children** to states for special education and related services (under this program, states must provide services to all handicapped children between the ages of three and five by 1991); **formula grants for handicapped infants and toddlers** for statewide programs of early intervention; and **early childhood education awards** to support demonstration projects, outreach, and research related to expansion and improvement of early intervention and special education services for handicapped children from birth to age eight.

Michigan receives federal monies under ESEA's Chapter 1 preschool program (\$3 million in FY 1987-88) and also participates in the special education programs funded by the federal government. In FY 1987-88, 15,885 Michigan children ranging in age from birth to six years received special education services of some type. The Michigan Office of Early Childhood Education administers the federally funded infant and toddler program and the Dependent Child Care grant program, to both of which the state contributes 25 percent in matching funds.

OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

The prospects for the expansion and refinement of ECE are perhaps brighter today than ever before. The patchwork of services persists, controversy over curriculum content continues, and the problem of distinguishing ECE from child care remains, but at least there is active dialogue across the country that is broadening in scope. This interest is likely to grow as a result of increasing societal pressures and the widening acceptance, based on contemporary research, that ECE has a positive, long-term influence on the social and educational development of young children.

More than half the female population in the United States is in the work force, and that fact alone will maintain the political pressure to address concerns about ECE and child care. President Bush has expressed his interest and support, and Congress is in a virtual bidding war with the administration to see who can do the most for children. In Michigan, state government has shown concern about ECE, but a formal, comprehensive policy is not yet in place.

Research in the areas of ECE and child care continues to grow. A major preprimary study under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement is currently under way in the United States and 17 foreign countries. The High/Scope Educational Research Foundation is the international coordinator of the three-phase project, which is expected to take nearly ten years to complete. The first comprehensive international assessment of ECE and child care needs and arrangements, this study should be of enormous benefit to policy makers, educators, and families in formulating policies in the next century.

Where do we go from here? The tendency is to react to a crisis, but this time the issue is the future of our children and the world in which they will live. Policy makers, educators, and parents need to stop reacting and take a *proactive* approach.

1. **Face realities and plan accordingly.** The value of quality ECE continues to be confirmed by research, and society's need for child care will continue to grow. Therefore, the dichotomy between ECE and child care must end; educators and caregivers must combine forces. The State of Michigan could begin by coordinating programs now run separately by the Department of Education and the Department of Social Services. The state also could require local coordination of ECE and child care programs.
2. **Money alone is not the answer; strong leadership and commitment to a comprehensive policy are critical.** We should know by now that merely throwing money at a problem does not solve it. A proactive approach to quality education and care for young children requires vigorous leadership from government and educators at the national and state level. Leaders must dare to take bold steps, not just tread where it is politically feasible. They not only must articulate the issues and garner public support but also must be the driving force behind the development of a *comprehensive* policy and its implementation. Michigan's program for at-risk four-year-olds is a beginning, but an aggressive commitment to a comprehensive policy from top leadership is crucial.
3. **Policies must be formulated for the good of the children.** Policy makers need to heed the results of ongoing research and the concerns of parents about what works best for their children. When providing services, we must be mindful of the development of the *total child*, not just formal academic instruction.
4. **Early childhood education is important to every child.** Most programs focus on children at risk, and they should remain a top priority, but the benefits of quality ECE are so great that they should be made available for all who want them. California and Texas have statewide programs, and New York and Florida have made large financial commitments. Given Michigan's enormous expenditures on its corrections system, the need to diversify the state's economy, and the recent reports about Michigan's poor graduation rate, we no longer can afford inadequate investment in our children. The state needs to move toward a public and private system of ECE services, available to all who are interested, similar to Michigan's kindergarten system.

In his study of the Michigan educational system, Dr. Harold Hodgkinson of the Institute for Educational Leadership concluded:

Looking at the educational landscape in Michigan, one is struck by the high level of effort, energy and support, yet the low rate of high school graduation. . . . It may be that Michigan's focus may need supplementation with an additional pledge—to make sure that every child is working at grade level. It may be that early childhood education is the key age level to make improvements. . . . As the number of children born in poverty increases in Michigan, as the number of children who enter public school "at risk" gets larger, the function of education begins to change, from *picking winners* to *creating winners*, a much more difficult task.¹⁶

We would do well to heed Dr. Hodgkinson's insights—quality early childhood education is a key to *creating winners* for Michigan's future. It will require strong leadership, a sound comprehensive policy based on research, and a commitment to reach *all* children. The time is now for each of us—policy makers, educators, and families—to make the right choices about the future of our children.

¹⁶ Harold L. Hodgkinson, *Michigan: The State and Its Educational System* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Educational Leadership, 1987), p.9.

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