

MAYOR'S ADVISORY COUNCIL ON

# **early childhood development & early education**

REPORT TO MAYOR KARL DEAN  
APRIL 13, 2011



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Dear Mayor Dean:

This report represents a diligent effort of eighteen outstanding and insightful Nashvillians working to analyze early child education and development as it stands today in our community. The overarching goal that continually guides these community members is developing ways to foster high-quality early years programming and healthy brain development that will promote the long-term health and stability of our city's youngest children.

As you well know, the early years have a long-lasting impact on the city and the quality of life for the residents we serve. High-quality development experiences in the early years increase the odds for academic success during the K-12 years and beyond, but it doesn't stop there. When our young children grow up to be adults, what occurs in the early years will strongly influence the social fabric of the city and the prosperity of our local economy.

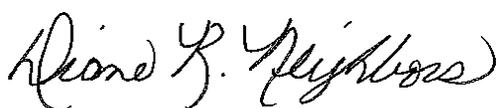
Regarding our work, members assembled as an Advisory Council for the first time on September 1, 2010, and subsequently broke into three work groups: Public Access, Public Awareness, Economic Development Strategies and Models. Throughout our time, we had regular work group meetings and convened full council gatherings to share and report out progress in our work groups. Collectively, we were able to analyze local, state, and national data; consult international research and best practices; interview local practitioners and policy makers; and identify key needs of Nashville-Davidson County families. We also received valuable technical assistance from National League of Cities regarding successful models and practices from around the country that would be beneficial for the needs of our local community.

As a result of the extensive work, we have established a city-wide vision of success for our children from birth to eight, and offer key and concise recommendations that are appropriately aligned to achieve this vision. Improvement in our recommended areas of focus will ultimately have a significant effect on the outcomes and quality of life for our youngest children, their families, and our city as a whole.

The contributions of all the committee members, the report's staff, and Laura McComas with National League of Cities are significant and substantial. This report is much richer and meaningful with their noteworthy investment of time and knowledge.

We are appreciative that as Mayor, you have made education a top priority for our city. Thank you for a keen focus and attention to the critical beginning years of the education lifecycle and the impact it has for our families and our city.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Diane R. Neighbors". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Diane Neighbors  
Vice Mayor  
Metropolitan Government of Nashville-Davidson County

## ORIGINAL CHARGE

The Mayor's Advisory Council on Early Childhood Development & Early Education was charged with the following:

To assess existing programs, services, policies and public awareness within Nashville-Davidson County, and use such assessments to make objective recommendations to the Mayor as they relate to the long-term health and stability of these provisions for children (0-8 years of age).<sup>1</sup>

-September 2010

1. See appendix A for the full Scope of Investigation and Timeline of Action for the Council & Appendix B for a general context of Early Childhood Education and Development in Davidson County.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Early child development and education programming have proven to be effective investments in both young children and the communities in which they live. An international body of research points to strong evidence that high-quality early child development and early education policies, with appropriate standards and accountability, yield many more benefits than costs through the use of finite community resource dollars. Not only do young children acquire important social-emotional skills that yield long term benefits to both society and individual families, but the early years are the greatest opportunity to develop cognitive skills for optimal brain development, healthy habits, and lay a foundation for years of future academic success. Employers also capture short and long-term benefits for their local firms when early care and education is supported. Yet many communities, including Nashville-Davidson County have not made concentrated, comprehensive efforts to support robust and aligned early care and education efforts to ensure the sustained healthy development and success of their youngest citizens.

While Nashville-Davidson County does many things “right” in providing key services and supports to promote early childhood development and education, there are undoubtedly needs and weaknesses within the landscape of early care and education that must be addressed. A wide variety of service providers exist within the field of early child development and education. As a result, this has created a patchwork system of care in which:

- Access to high-quality early learning opportunities is limited.
- There is limited public knowledge and awareness, especially among the business community in terms of how to support employee-parents and partner with the early childhood community.
- Transitions between the public schools and the private, public, and informal provision of early care and education are weak and/or uncoordinated.
- Providers lack the supports they need to provide the highest quality of services consistently.
- Perhaps most important, the city lacks an aligned, comprehensive vision for supporting the healthy development, both cognitive as well as physical and sustained school success of all Nashville-Davidson County children.

These concerns are highlighted given the intimate connection of this industry to the productivity of the local economy. The child development and education domain is a source of employment and livelihood for a considerable number of individuals, while simultaneously providing assistance to many more families and single parents seeking active participation in the local workforce.

This report serves two purposes. First, it provides a picture of the current landscape of Nashville-Davidson County’s early childhood policies and programming, including influences from local, state and national forces, and particular barriers that impede high-quality programming. Second, it articulates a vision going forward and recommends a set of prioritized concrete action steps to accomplish the proposed vision.

# PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

1. While Metro Nashville-Davidson County is home to many robust early childhood education programs, there continues to be limited access to both public and private early childhood education for children and families.

- A. Access to programs and support services varies across different geographical locations and neighborhoods. Of Davidson County's approximately 48,285 children ages 0-5, it is estimated that only 37% participate in some form of licensed child care or education program.
- B. Approximately 35% of eligible children who apply for Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) Voluntary Pre-K program are wait-listed.
- C. Formalized infant and toddler care, which is especially critical for a child's earliest developmental stage, is most difficult to access. This is due in large part to its higher costs of operation which are necessary to help ensure the health and safety of young children.

2. High-quality early child development programming among all providers is not universal.

- A. While only 37% of all children are in any type of care, an estimated 27% of Davidson County's entire 0-5 year old population participates in a high-quality formalized care program.
- B. The Department of Human Services (DHS) licensing process for child care providers is designed to ensure the health and safety of children. All programs – Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K (TN-VPK), Head Start, and community-based child care programs – must meet minimal DHS licensing standards.
- C. However, not all programs pursue a DHS star rating. DHS maintains a 3-star rating system that is built upon the licensing process. The 3-star rating program is meant to differentiate program quality among individual providers. Tracking by enrollment in Nashville-Davidson County, 15.7% of County 0-5 year olds are in 3-star centers, 1.8% in 2-star centers, 0.3% are 1-star, 7% are in 0-star centers, and 11.5% are in centers that do not participate (NP) in the star rating system (such as MNPS Voluntary Pre-K).
- D. As a state of Tennessee Department of Education program (DOE), Voluntary Pre-K classrooms in Nashville-Davidson County do not participate in the DHS 3-star rating system, maintaining their own quality oversight process, but must still be licensed by DHS.
- E. Two local supplementary programs, United Way's Read to Succeed and Vanderbilt's Early Reading First Project, have both shown statistically impressive gains in preschool children's language and literacy skills, and especially for Economically Disadvantaged children. Read to Succeed is a program affiliated with a group of local community-based child care providers while Early Reading First is a program based in MNPS Pre-K classrooms.

3. Better accountability is needed that more closely reflects outcome measures of early childhood development and education for young children.
  - A. Ambiguity exists about whether the DHS 3-star rating system and the Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K oversight processes are accurate and effective mechanisms to incentivize and comprehensively measure quality learning and developmental outcomes for children.
  - B. Programs use different standards and assessments that promote and determine a certain set of early childhood programming practices. The data systems, standards, and assessments currently in place do not emphasize non-cognitive skill development for all children that participate in programs as much as they should.
  - C. Current and potential funders, both private and public sources, of early child development programs are unsure of what they are funding – child care or early childhood development and education – and why.
  
4. Many community-based providers in Nashville-Davidson County struggle with day-to-day business management operations. Ultimately, this affects the programming and quality outcome for children in these centers.
  - A. Center operators and personnel face multiple challenges, including budgetary restrictions and lack of time, to implement advanced management technology and techniques to help streamline business operations. Supports such as business and organizational management training and business technologies are needed to help develop and acquire greater business efficiencies.
  - B. Providers throughout Nashville-Davidson County have opportunities to increase the efficiency of the licensing compliance process -- thus allowing more focus and monetary resources to be spent on increasing the quality of early child development programming.
  
5. There is a public awareness gap (both collective and individual) of the critical importance and opportunity of early childhood development (both physical and cognitive) in a child's first few years, and knowledge of the corollary best practices that foster this development.
  - A. As their child's first teachers and greatest advocates, it is important that Nashville-Davidson County families have easy access to a complete set of parent education and support resources. While many parents choose not to access the formal early learning/child care system and arrange for informal care, there is still a need to provide all parents, especially those outside of the care system, with access to information and community resources that will help them promote their child's healthy development.
  - B. The health care and public health provider communities present an excellent opportunity to share early childhood development information and support resources. These are especially crucial partners related to the birth process and pediatrician visits during the window of opportunity to share critical information at the start of a child's physical and developmental life.
  - C. The profile and importance of early care and education and healthy child development need to grow to create a city-wide value for investing in all young children.

6. Transitions between the public schools and the private, public, and informal provision of early care and education are weak and/or uncoordinated.

- A. Communication and synergy between MNPS, parents, and community-based early education providers (such as Head Start, Early Head Start, informal care givers, and private providers) needs to be improved.
- B. School readiness expectations for MNPS students entering Kindergarten are frequently misaligned with community-based providers and informal care givers' early childhood programming. In addition, community-based teachers, parents, and elementary public school teachers need to more effectively communicate individual student needs to each other when a child is moving through a transition phase.
- C. MNPS should formulate a partnership with community-based providers – private and public, informal and formal – to widely and effectively disseminate publicly known Kindergarten intake expectations, and to assist community-based providers to help align curricula, assessments and teaching practices to meet the published expectations. Other developmental expectations including health and nutrition should be included in the conversation.

7. Few businesses in Davidson County are active community partners in the early childhood education and development landscape.

- A. Without question, businesses generously support K-12 education and civic initiatives in Nashville-Davidson County. While much has been done to promote the “family friendly” life of the city, current and newly arriving young families often find limited or nonexistent access to early care services, benefits, or opportunities through employers.
- B. Relationships between the early care and learning community and the business community are not well-developed. These relationships need to be better leveraged to garner greater public support and resource support for early childhood issues.
- C. Employers tend to overlook policies, opportunities and workplace supports that would help reduce employee work-family conflicts, even though many of these measures are low-cost to no-cost. Incorporating these employee policies and benefits to a workplace environment would help increase profitability and productivity by reducing costs associated with higher absenteeism, higher turnover (and new hire training), and low employee satisfaction levels.