

**Early Learning in Idaho: Finding Common Ground**

Conference Proceedings

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Prepared for the Andrus Center on Public Policy

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## Foreword

In May 2015, the Andrus Center for Public Policy and the James A. and Louise McClure Center for Public Policy Research had the great privilege to cohost *Early Learning in Idaho: Finding Common Ground*. Members of our organizing committee represented organizations from across the business community and political spectrum. Our common goal was to seek an Idaho solution to the serious problem that almost half of Idaho’s children enter kindergarten without the educational foundation they need to be successful.

Our overarching objective is to see Idaho’s children be successful in their educational endeavors and their life thereafter. Toward that end, our conference aim was to investigate the science of early learning, to review established correlations between early learning and academic and social success later in life, to document the current status of learning environments available to Idaho’s young children, and to look at what early learning tools are being used successfully in Idaho and around the nation.

We ended our day with an open discussion on how Idahoans and their elected representatives can find common ground – pathways to early learning programs that fit the needs of our diverse communities and families. The overwhelming message we heard was that the time to act is now. We offer this narrative of our conference as a starting point for continued discussion of an Idaho solution to the early learning challenges that currently confront too many of our young children.

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## **Executive Summary**

### **Early Learning in Idaho: Finding Common Ground**

In May 2015, the Andrus Center for Public Policy at Boise State University and the McClure Center for Public Policy Research at the University of Idaho sponsored an Early Learning Conference in Boise, Idaho. The conference brought together 230 stakeholders for an open forum on topics related to early learning. This summary presents an overview of the issues and findings discussed. A more detailed report follows this executive summary.

#### **The Science of Learning**

Children experience rapid brain development during the first 1,000 days of life. Social and emotional attachments, language proficiency, and cognitive development are largely formed during this time. By the time children enter kindergarten, 85-90% of their brain capacity is developed and yet just 1% of Idaho's public funds are devoted to this period.

Several studies show that quality preschools significantly close the language development gap correlated with socioeconomic status and parent education levels. The Perry Preschool Program documented positive social outcomes 30 years following preschool. These positive outcomes lead to cost benefits from \$3 to \$17 for every \$1 invested in preschool.

#### **Idaho's Early Learning Landscape**

Of the 140,000 Idaho children under age six, 55% live in homes where both parents work. One in five children live in poverty, and one in four live in single-parent households. Those living at or near poverty levels tend not to have access to reliable high quality early learning environments.

There is no comprehensive state system to monitor Idaho's many childcare and preschool programs. Some are state or city licensed, some are accredited by the National Association of Education for Young Children (NAEYC), and many are neither licensed nor accredited.

According to the Idaho Reading Indicator, just 54% of kindergarteners meet the grade level benchmark when they enter kindergarten. County to county performance varies widely with a low of 15% and a high of 92% meeting benchmarks.

### **Early Learning Success Stories**

There are examples of successful early learning programs in Idaho. Two were presented at the conference:

1) Family Advocates presented the success of their program which includes Baby Steps, Parents as Teachers, and Parents Anonymous. These programs have been supported by state funding and have led to significant increases in school readiness levels.

2) Idaho City's Basin School District has offered a universal preschool program since 1999. Kindergarten students' reading scores have more than doubled, and scores on the ISAT in both reading and math for children who attend preschool are higher than for those who do not.

### **Learning through Digital Media**

The wide range of television and Internet based programming that provides early learning support to families was presented. Content is designed to be highly engaging and aligned to theories of learning related to early reading and language development.

### **Learning from Utah and Mississippi**

Two states reported on models currently in place to promote early learning opportunities.

1) Social Impact Bond (Utah). Utah's Speaker of the House, Representative Greg Hughes, sponsored legislation that commits public and private funding to expand preschool for

children in the Granite School District in Utah through a social impact bond model. A service provider (preschool) provides the preschool program, the vulnerable population of children are identified at the beginning of the program, and the children must then meet identified benchmarks. If they do, the state reallocates dollars that would have been spent on more costly intervention services to repaying investors and continuing to fund the preschool program.

2) Mississippi First Early Childhood Collaboratives. Rachel Canter, CEO of Mississippi First, presented the Mississippi model that relies on a 50/50 cost share to create local early childhood collaboratives in three areas of the state. Mississippi has committed \$3,000,000 in state funding. Collaboratives must be designed to meet quality standards, but can be flexible in approach to meet local needs.

### **Towards an Idaho Solution: A Discussion**

Panelists discussed issues and topics that had been presented during the day, and responded to audience questions about how to move Idaho forward with a cohesive early learning proposal.

The main points of discussion and agreement included:

1. The time is right to move forward on improving early childhood education in Idaho.
2. Programs need to be high quality, adhering to quality standards.
3. Parents need to be involved and engaged.
4. Multi-faceted approaches tailored to local needs are important.
5. Early childhood education must be supported by continued high quality education in kindergarten and beyond.

## **Early Learning in Idaho: Finding Common Ground**

**May 4, 2015**

### **Conference Proceedings**

In May 2015, the Andrus Center for Public Policy at Boise State University and the McClure Center for Public Policy Research at the University of Idaho sponsored an Early Learning Conference in Boise, Idaho. The conference brought together 230 stakeholders from a variety of backgrounds including state and local policymakers, state department offices, nonprofit organizations, school districts, business leaders and medical experts. The goal was to have an open forum to discuss issues related to early learning.

The McClure Center published a report, *Idaho At a Glance: “Early Childhood Learning”* in May 2015 that provides an overview of the early learning landscape in the state. Their main findings are summarized in the document as follows (p.1, Dearien, Salant & Cruz, 2015):

1. There are roughly 146,000 children under age 6 in Idaho. More than half live in households in which all parents work outside the home.
2. Idaho has no comprehensive system to track all places where children are being cared for when their parents are working. We have data on the number of childcare slots licensed by the state and cities (about 24,000 and 8,000 respectively). However, we do not know how many of these slots are in facilities that provide opportunities for children to develop skills essential to achieving success when they begin school.
3. Family engagement is a key element of many early learning programs, including Head Start and Early Head Start. Other examples are “Read to Me” offered through public libraries, and the Maternal Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program.

4. Though we lack good information on the extent of learning opportunities for Idaho's youngest children, we do know that only 54% of Idaho's kindergartners enter school ready to learn to read. This suggests Idaho's young children would benefit from more learning opportunities before they get to elementary school, both in the home and elsewhere.

Together, these findings point to the need for a broader discussion on early learning in Idaho. The goal of this conference was to bring together a diverse group of stakeholders including policymakers, legislators, researchers, government agencies, businesses and nonprofit organizations to develop common understandings about how Idaho might move forward with early learning policies.

**Opening Remarks** were made by former Governor Cecil Andrus, Chairman of the Andrus Center, Priscilla Salant, Director of the McClure Center and by Lieutenant Governor Brad Little.

Governor Andrus opened the conference by thanking the audience for attending a session to learn more about the education and well-being of young children. His remarks focused on the importance of education. He stated, "One of the greatest gifts we can provide to children is a good education. Too many young children in Idaho enter kindergarten without any knowledge of their letter sounds, which puts them at a disadvantage for learning to read. Children who start out behind often stay there, and by third grade we can predict which children are at increased risk for dropping out. These issues should be addressed with collaboration."

Priscilla Salant commented on the collaboration between the Andrus and McClure centers in planning and organizing the conference. The common goal is to support a nonpartisan dialogue about learning opportunities for Idaho's young children beginning at home and continuing in all the settings in which young children find themselves today. The conversation

about early learning has been going on for many years including several failed legislative attempts in the past. Today's event is a collaboration among universities, partner organizations and event sponsors.

**The Science of Learning** was presented by Dr. Noreen Womack from St. Luke's Treasure Valley Pediatrics. Dr. Womack is a pediatrician with specific expertise in child development.

**Critical Developmental Windows.** Dr. Womack first presented an overview of critical periods during child development. The first 1,000 days (including gestation) of a child's life are the most critical. Rapid brain development occurs within this timeframe, and this leads to important developments such as social and emotional attachment, language proficiency, and cognitive development. By the time children enter kindergarten, they have gained approximately 85-90% of their brain capacity. During this critical developmental period, synaptic connections are being made – if these connections are not made, they are pruned later, decreasing a child's overall brain capacity.

**Interactions that support development.** Several studies indicate that in order to develop social, emotional and language skills, children require “serve and return” interactions. This includes interactive face-to-face time with an adult. Without this type of interaction, children quickly display signs of distress. Children who are repeatedly deprived of interaction over time experience toxic stress. Toxic stress disrupts the brain's architecture and increases neural connections that are dedicated to fear and anger responses while pruning connections dedicated to reasoning, learning, memory and emotional regulation.

This is substantiated by longitudinal follow-up studies of children placed in Romanian orphanages that did not provide high levels of interaction. Children who were adopted at less than four months of age developed typically, but children who were adopted after four months of

age experienced life-long problems including developmental delays, cognitive deficits, anxiety, and depression. This interaction cannot be replicated by an ‘interactive’ computer device.

Children’s need for human connection for brain development has led to the American Academy of Pediatrics’ recommendation for no screen time for children under age two.

**Language development.** One of the most critical skills to develop during these early years is language and vocabulary. Children develop language primarily through interactions with adults who talk and read to them starting at birth. Numerous research studies support this finding, including the landmark study conducted by Hart and Risley (1995), that identified a significant word gap among children of college educated parents, children of working class parents, and children of parents on welfare. Children from the lowest socioeconomic status levels had the smallest vocabularies. Vocabulary is a significant predictor of later school success. It is a reliable estimate of a child’s background knowledge, which is the most significant factor contributing to later comprehension and learning. Having a large vocabulary facilitates further language learning, creating what is sometimes referred to as the Matthew Effect, in which children who begin their early years with strong language development continue to make gains in language, reading and academic achievement at rates much greater than children who enter school with limited vocabularies.

**The Importance of Preschool.** Although language development is highly correlated with socioeconomic status and parent education levels, there is substantial evidence that high quality preschools can have a significant positive effect in closing the word gap. One example is the Perry Preschool Project, which was conducted in the early 1970’s in Ypsilanti, Michigan. One hundred and twenty participants (60 attended preschool; 60 served as controls) were followed for a period of over 30 years. Children who attended preschool had lower rates of negative social

and academic outcomes such as placement in special education programs, dropping out, receiving welfare, teen pregnancy and incarceration. Children who attended preschool also were more likely to graduate high school, attend college and earn higher wages.

Other longitudinal studies have been conducted and report similar results. The Abecedarian Project conducted in Appalachia focused on providing language development support to adults and their infants from birth through age five, and preschool placement beginning at age three. Similar to the Perry Preschool Project, they reported that participants had higher rates of positive social and educational outcomes than control group children, and these gains were maintained into adulthood. Current efforts to study the cost-benefit of preschool include the Abbott Preschool project in New Jersey, and research efforts undertaken by the National Research Center on Early Learning led by Steve Barnett at Rutgers University. Cost benefit analyses range from a \$3 to \$17 return on every \$1 invested in preschool.

**Idaho's Early Learning Status.** Idaho is one of 9 states that does not provide public funding for high quality preschool programs (Barnett, Carolan, Squires, Clarke-Brown & Horowitz, 2015). However, reports by Idaho Voices for Children and the Idaho Association for the Education of Young Children (IAEYC) indicate that more than two-thirds of children between the ages of 0-6 in Idaho are placed in some form of childcare setting prior to entering school. There is, however, no state level system to determine where these childcare centers are, what programs they offer, and whether they meet recommended minimum standards for safety, health and education of young children.

**Long-term impact of early learning.** Idaho currently has a 'Go On' campaign, which includes a goal that more than 60% of Idaho high school graduates will attend some form of higher education. This campaign would be more likely to succeed if more children graduate high

school. More students will graduate high school if they are proficient readers by third grade. More students will be proficient in reading by third grade if they enter kindergarten with strong early reading skills, and more will enter kindergarten with these skills if they have access to high quality preschool programs.

Limited reading proficiency in the third grade has been linked to incarceration rates by Mike Brunner, a former fellow at the U.S. Department of Justice and author of *Retarding America: The Imprisonment of Potential*, a book on the relationship between juvenile crime and illiteracy. Bruner previously worked for the Idaho Department of Labor and was one of the first people to draw the connection between low reading achievement and incarceration rates. Some states now project prison capacity by reviewing the percentage of children unable to meet third grade reading levels. The United States is ranked 24<sup>th</sup> out of 65 developed countries in literacy rates. The United States is first of 223 countries in incarceration rates. More than 70% of incarcerated adults did not graduate high school. The return on investment for preschool has been shown to be greater than returns on later job training programs, yet only 1% of public resources are spent on the 90% of development that occurs during early childhood.

**Idaho's Early Learning Landscape**, a report prepared by the McClure Center was presented by Priscilla Salant (<http://www.uidaho.edu/class/mcclure-center/publications/idaho-at-a-glance>). The report was a response to questions from Idaho's legislators, providing an assessment of the opportunities that Idaho's young children have to learn and an indication of how well Idaho's young children are prepared once they reach kindergarten.

**Are Idaho's Kindergartners Ready to Learn?** The only statewide measure of kindergarten readiness is the Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI), which has been in use for 15 years. The IRI is administered at the beginning and end of the school year for all students in

kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. The fall kindergarten IRI provides the first opportunity to evaluate school and reading readiness levels. The IRI measures only one dimension of the skills that children learn, and in kindergarten the IRI assesses a child's ability to name letters and identify letter sounds fluently. To be considered at benchmark, a child needs to be able to identify more than 11 letters in one minute. It is important to note that Idaho sets one of the lowest benchmarks in the nation for determining reading readiness. Only 54% of kindergartners are able to meet the grade level benchmark in the fall of their kindergarten year and this level of performance has held steady for nearly 10 years. 54% is the state average, but performance varies widely county by county across the state, with a low of 15% of kindergartners meeting grade level benchmarks, and a high of 92% meeting benchmarks. Children most at risk for not developing strong early learning skills are those who live in poverty or come from fragile families.

**Opportunities for Early Learning in Idaho.** There are approximately 140,000 children in Idaho under the age of six. Approximately 55% of these children live in homes where both parents work and require childcare. Children from fragile families – those who live at or near poverty levels – tend not to have reliable access to high quality early learning environments. Children from fragile families miss out on dependable interactions with adults and safe learning environments. One in five children in Idaho live in poverty, and one in four live in single-parent households.

There are three approaches to early learning opportunities in Idaho: 1) Home-based or family-based programs; 2) Early Intervention options, and 3) Childcare and Preschool.

*Home- or Family-Based Programs.* These include programs such as Parents as Teachers, the Nurse/Family partnership, the Idaho Commission on Libraries *Read to Me* program, and

home visiting programs conducted by nonprofit organizations. The goal of these programs is to provide support to families, providing resources and information on how to create quality early learning environments for their children.

*Early Intervention Programs.* These include programs like the federally funded infant and toddler program, developmental preschools for children with disabilities, and Head Start and Early Head Start programs. These programs serve an identified population, for example, children with disabilities or children who live in poverty, and then provide preschool and other intervention programs to promote safe, healthy and quality early learning environments.

*Private Childcare and Preschool Programs.* There is no comprehensive state system to monitor the many childcare and preschool programs that exist in Idaho. Some are state and/or city licensed, some are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and others are neither licensed nor accredited.

#### **A Review of Programs with Professional Standards for Caregivers/Early Educators.**

There are several childcare and preschool programs in Idaho that have professional standards for caregivers or early educators.

- Home Visiting Programs, serving 500 children
- 19 NAEYC accredited agencies, serving 1,800 children
- State Developmental Preschools, serving 2,800 children
- Infant and Toddler early intervention programs, serving 3,700 children
- Head Start and Early Head Start, serving 5,000 children
  - Because Idaho does not provide state matching dollars, these programs currently serve only 20% of the eligible children in Idaho.
- Public Kindergarten, serving 21,000 children

- City Licensed Care, serving 8,100 children
  - Eight cities in Idaho have city licensing requirements.
- State Licensed Care, serving 24,100 children
  - Licensure applies to any childcare facility serving more than six children.

**Summary of Idaho's Early Learning Landscape.** The time period between birth to age five represents a critical time period for learning. Idaho has no comprehensive system to track where children are being cared for. Family engagement is a critical element of early learning programs. Although we lack comprehensive information on early learning opportunities in Idaho, we do know that only 54% of Idaho children enter kindergarten ready to learn to read.

**Early Learning Success Stories** were presented by Diane Demarest, the Chief Operating Officer of Family Advocates, and John McFarlane, the Superintendent of Idaho City's Basin School District.

**Family Advocates.** Children need nurturing relationships, structure and expectations, physical protection, safety and regulation, developmentally appropriate experiences and stable and supportive communities. The first five years of a child's life impact whether a child attends college or has an increased probability of going to prison. According to the 2015 Idaho Kids Count report, more than half of children under six have both parents working. Only 30% of children ages 3-4 are enrolled in preschool in Idaho. Twenty percent of children under 18 in Idaho live in poverty. In some counties, the percentage of children living in poverty is as high as 40%.

Early reading and language development are the strongest predictors of later academic success. Recently, early math skills have been demonstrated to be one of the strongest predictors of later academic success (Duncan et al., 2007). Specific early reading skills that are highly

predictive of later reading development include print awareness, language and vocabulary, and phonological awareness. Early math skills that are highly predictive of later math achievement include number sense, measurement, problem solving and geometry (spatial relationships). These skills can be developed through high-quality early learning experiences.

**Community Support Programs Provided Through Family Advocates.** Family Advocates provides several programs designed to support children and their families in need. These programs are supported through a combination of state funding, grants and donations.

*Parents as Teachers.* Parents as Teachers is a program that is open to parents of all income levels and provides information and resources on how parents can best support their children's early learning. Data collected to measure the impact of this program indicate the following outcomes:

- Parents' knowledge of child development and brain growth increased
- Parents' confidence increased
- Parents interacted with their children more and read to them more often
- 82% of low income children entered kindergarten ready to read versus 64% who had not participated

*Home Visiting.* Home visiting programs rely on highly trained volunteers who work with families to build a collaborative and supportive relationship. In this model, the parent is viewed as the expert on their child's needs. A strength-based philosophy underlies this program, leveraging parents' strengths to ensure their children receive high quality early learning experiences. Visits are individualized based on family needs – there is not a set script or program to follow. The goals of the program are to help families build their knowledge and to provide connections to other programs and families that can support them.

*Baby Steps.* Baby Steps is a program focused on supporting and educating parents about child development from birth to 18 months. Baby Steps is a community-based program that provides a non-judging, safe environment for parents to communicate and ask questions related to caring for and raising their infants and toddlers. Through this program, parents gain knowledge on child development, health, legal and financial issues, and both give and receive support to fellow members.

*Parents Anonymous.* Parents Anonymous is a weekly parent support group that is led by a certified facilitator and a parent group leader. This program provides a safe, non-judgmental environment where members can give and receive support. Through this program, parents develop leadership skills, identify their strengths, and learn to understand their child's needs.

**Idaho City Preschool Program.** John McFarlane, Superintendent of Idaho City's Basin School District, presented information about the universal preschool program that began in 1999 in Idaho City. The program was started through grant funding provided by the Albertson Foundation. The school district collaborated with Head Start to develop and expand a preschool program to serve all four-year-old children whose parents chose to enroll them in the program. The initial grant period ended in 2002, so the school district started to fund the program using the federal funds secured through the Secure Rural Schools Act. Now, because there is state legislation that prohibits the use of state public funds to educate children younger than five, the school district relies on a variety of sources of support including grants, fundraisers, and fees to attend preschool.

The cost of the program is approximately \$30,000 to run the two-full-day per week program for no more than 18 students. Parents are charged \$150 per month for tuition. However, most families receive either full or partial scholarships. To keep costs for the program low, two

trained paraprofessionals (rather than certified teachers) run the program. The school district works to maintain the program because the standards and expectations for school readiness have increased with the move to the Idaho Core Standards. With increased expectations for kindergarten, preschool focuses on the early learning skills needed to be successful with a more rigorous curriculum.

Since beginning the program, the school district has seen an increase in the percentage of children who are able to meet kindergarten benchmarks. In 2014, 69% of kindergartners who attended preschool scored proficient on the fall IRI, compared to 44% who did not attend preschool. These initial gains appear to be maintained throughout high school. Fifty-two percent of students who attended preschool scored advanced on the ISAT reading in 10<sup>th</sup> grade compared to 19% of students who didn't. Forty-one percent of children attending preschool scored advanced on ISAT math compared to only 30% of students who didn't.

One-third of Idahoans live in a rural setting, which limits the enrichment opportunities that parents can offer their children. Preschool gives children the opportunity to participate in activities that increase their vocabulary and language development. The richness of vocabulary is important. Children from higher socioeconomic families will hear 30 million more words than children from lower socioeconomic homes. Preschool can help to close this word gap. Preschool offers parents choices.

**Learning through Digital Media** was presented by Debra Sanchez, Senior Vice President for Education and Children's Content Operations for the Corporation of Public Broadcasting. The wide range of television and Internet based programming that provides early learning support to families was presented.

Although there has been an increase in the types of media available, TV is still the most widely used and available. Seventy-seven percent of all children ages 2-8 watch PBS. PBS mobile apps have been downloaded over 10 million times, and there are 11 million unique hits to PBSkids.org each month. PBS continues to find ways to support parents, especially in rural areas, by providing tools they can use to support their children's learning.

**Learning from Utah and Mississippi** included presentations from Representative and Speaker of the House, Greg Hughes (Utah), and from Rachel Canter, CEO of Mississippi First.

**Utah's Social Impact Bond (SIB) to support Preschool.** In 2013, Goldman Sachs and J.B. Pritzker, a Chicago-based investor, struck a \$7 million deal with United Way of Salt Lake to expand access to early childhood education for up to 3,700 low-income children through the use of state-sponsored social impact bonds. Under the arrangement, quality preschool services would be made available to 3- and 4-year-olds at low-income schools in the Granite and Park City school districts. In return, the investors would be repaid by the state for documented savings from a decreased need for costly special education and remedial services for the students during their primary and secondary years.

**Mississippi First Collaboratives.** Rachel Canter, the CEO of a nonprofit organization called Mississippi First, presented a collaborative model in place in Mississippi. Through a 50/50 match of state and local funding, collaboratives work together to offer preschool programming specific to the needs of their individual communities. Mississippi has authorized up to \$3 million in matching state funds for the program. The collaboratives include private and public early childhood organizations and offer preschool to children in the districts in which these collaboratives are located.

**Towards an Idaho Solution: A Discussion** was a panel presentation that included Janice Fletcher from the University of Idaho, Rod Gramer from Idaho Business for Education, Beth Oppenheimer from IAEYC, Chuck Zimmerly from the Idaho Department of Education, Idaho State Representative Christy Perry (District 11), and Idaho State Senator Steven Thayn (District 8). Panelists discussed issues and topics that had been presented during the day, and responded to audience questions about how to move Idaho forward with a cohesive early learning proposal.

The main points of discussion and agreement included:

1. The time is right to move forward on improving early childhood education in Idaho.
2. Programs need to be high quality, adhering to quality standards.
3. Parents need to be involved and engaged.
4. Multi-faceted approaches tailored to local needs are important.
5. Early childhood education must be supported by continued high quality education in kindergarten and beyond.

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