

March 27, 2017

Secretary Hanna Skandera  
New Mexico Public Education Department  
300 Don Gaspar Ave.  
Santa Fe, NM 87501

RE: **Connecting Early Childhood Education to Opportunities Provided Through the Every Student Succeeds Act**

Dear Secretary Skandera,

During the past few months, early childhood educators, supporters and leaders gathered to strategize how to connect with opportunities provided through the Every Student Succeeds Act, ESSA. Part of our work included a webinar with Danielle Ewen, a national policy expert with EducationCounsel, to learn more about ESSA and promising practices from states that have aligned early childhood and K-12 systems ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXPXz\\_1oKck](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXPXz_1oKck)). We looked to a letter from New Jersey early childhood leaders to their state department of education to further develop our understandings.

We see promising possibilities to enhance early childhood education quality, integrate and align systems that support early childhood education and K-12 education, and improve transitions between systems that support young children and students.

Following up on a number of meetings, we recommend moving forward by:

1. Expanding access to high quality early learning opportunities;
2. Encouraging and building on collaboration between multiple systems; and
3. Supporting all early learning educators.

Additionally, the signatories of this letter offer their services as a community advisory board to support efforts to work toward the strategies above. However we may be of support, we're interested in discussing further.

One of the signatories, Learning Alliance New Mexico, conducted local outreach and stakeholder engagement through focus groups during 2016<sup>1</sup> to support and supplement the outreach of NMPED<sup>2</sup>. Within many of the focus group conversations, stakeholders communicated a desire and interest in improved access to high-quality early learning opportunities. Our letter responds to the desire and interest expressed by New Mexicans.

We recommend the following actions to work toward three broad strategies:

## 1. Expanding Access to High Quality Early Learning Opportunities

New Mexico early childhood advocates and leaders have worked hard to continually improve the quality of early care and learning opportunities for children birth-5. In this work, public funding plays a critical role, through statewide Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) work, NM PreK, and child care

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<sup>1</sup> <http://learningalliancencm.org/countdown-to-better-schools-campaign/essa-stakeholder-engagement>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ped.state.nm.us/ped/ESSA.html>

assistance. School districts are an important partner in this work. We recommend that the Public Education Department use the state ESSA plan to incorporate use of ESSA funds to provide high quality learning opportunities for our youngest children in the following ways:

- Encourage family engagement across all early learning settings that build upon the strengths and enhance the resources available in each community.
- Building on local Race to the Top work, where communities are identified as “Early Childhood Investment Zones,” require that mandatory needs assessment include a landscape of the early childhood opportunities for children in the investment zones. This needs assessment should include information and data on:
  - Where are the early childhood programs in the areas served by low-performing schools?;
  - What is the quality of those programs (as defined by NM FOCUS TQRIS, accreditation, state Pre-K, licensing or other source)?;
  - Who is served by those programs, including age, income, neighborhood, race and ethnicity?;
  - What other early childhood resources (home visiting, early intervention, library programs, before and after-school programs, etc.) are available to families in these communities?;
  - What are the rates of chronic absenteeism in early learning programs in these areas? and
  - What are the rates of suspension and expulsion by subgroup in early learning programs in these areas?
- Explore how Title I resources provided to public schools can be used most effectively to partner with community programs to provide young children with increased access to high-quality early learning opportunities.

## 2. Encouraging and Building on Collaboration Between Multiple Systems

Across New Mexico policymakers and practitioners are working to effectively connect and align the early care and learning system for children birth-5 in CYFD and DOH with the public education system. The state ESSA plan can provide avenues for fostering connections between these state level systems and local agencies through the following recommendations:

- Continue to grow the successful aspects of Race to the Top, New Mexico’s significant federally funded collaboration among PED, CYFD and DOH:
  - Strengthen use and widespread understanding of NM Early Learning Guidelines Birth through Kindergarten;
  - Further develop and use the Early Childhood Information Data System, ECIDS, to track child well-being across systems; and
  - Coordinate DOH-Part C and LEA-Part B early childhood intervention for children with special needs, and support universal developmental screening birth-5.
- Coordinate services among PED, CYFD, and DOH to strengthen expansion of existing effective programs.

- Facilitate and draft the development of MOAs among districts, Head Starts, state New Mexico Pre-Ks and child care programs to ensure non-duplication, and more effective use of available resources.
- Provide appropriate consultants and supports for the physical, social, emotional and mental health development needs of young children as identified by early childhood programs.
- Implement transition practices where districts and early childhood programs share: curricula, relevant data and information, opportunities to visit each other's classrooms, and plans to better align services for all early learners.
- Build transition pathways that will ensure positive children's development and achievement from early learning throughout their school years.

### 3. Supporting All Early Learning Educators

The capacity of the early care and learning workforce is critical to the success of young children in programs, yet many educators lack the learning opportunities they need to effectively help young children learn and succeed. Teachers, leaders, and other professionals in programs serving children from birth through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade need to understand child development and appropriate practices across these age/grade spans to serve children and families effectively. The ESSA plan provides opportunities to coordinate with other systems to improve teaching and learning in all settings, including the following:

- Use funding such as Title I, Title II and Title III funds to create and support joint professional development opportunities for elementary school principals and administrators, elementary school teachers, and early care and learning providers, including Early Head Start and Head Start, New Mexico Pre-K, those participating in FOCUS TQRIS, and all programs that accept child care assistance, in the following areas:
  - Strengthening appropriate child development and instructional practices that foster learning across the range of developmental domains, including social and emotional;
  - Improving transition practices for children from early childhood programs to kindergarten and between the early elementary grades, as well as issues related to school readiness;
  - Working with families who have children with special needs and other issues to identify and support their children in the classroom and minimize suspensions and expulsions;
  - Understanding and implementing standards for social-emotional learning;
  - Using effective parent and family engagement strategies and best practices; and
  - Working with children who are English language learners by supporting dual language learning and appropriate bilingual bicultural teaching methods.
- Prioritize training for school leaders on effective practices to impact rates of chronic absenteeism through:
  - Improved transition planning between children from early childhood programs to kindergarten and between the early elementary grades;
  - Effective communication with families and communities; and
  - Implementation of interventions, enriched programs and other strategies.

We are committed to supporting the recommendations in this letter and working with you and your team at PED to bolster high-quality early childhood education, align systems to support children, and create an integrated continuum of services that prepare our children for school, career and life success.

Warm regards from the following organizations and individuals:

### **Organizations**

American Indian Language Policy Research and Teacher Training Center

AppleTree Educational Center, Truth or Consequences

CHI St Joseph's Children

Community Partnerships for Children, Silver City

Downtown Preschool and Pre-kindergarten -- Donna Fletcher

Learning Alliance New Mexico -- Ian Esquibel, Executive Director

Little Things Matter, Truth or Consequences

Luna County Early Childhood Coalition -- Crystal Pena, President

New Mexico Association for the Education of Young Children

New Mexico Child Care and Education Association

New Mexico Head Start Association -- Amanda Gibson-Smith, President

New Mexico Voices for Children -- James Jimenez, Executive Director

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Partnership for Community Action

United Way of Santa Fe County/New Mexico Early Childhood Development Partnership.

UNM Family Development Program: A Center for Excellence in Early Learning -- Lois Vermilya, Director

### **Individuals**

Jennie Bauman de Romero, Student, NM Highlands University

Kimberly Benavidez, Student, NM Highlands University & YDI La Mariposa, Early Head Start

Carlotta Bird, Educator

Mary Bliss, NM PreK Teacher, Alameda Elementary School, Albuquerque

Susannah Burke, PB&J Family Services, Inc.

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Maria Elena Salazar, PhD., Instructor at NMSU College of Education, Curriculum and Instruction & Mother of three

Diane Segura, Student, NM Highlands University

Susan Keil Smith, MA, Early Childhood Consultant

Susan Taylor, Hatch Valley Public Schools. Assistant Superintendent, Special Ed Director, & NM PreK Coordinator

Chelsea White, Student, NM Highlands University

Tish Wilson, Early Childhood/Child Development Specialist & Vice President, Emeritus, Community Development Institute, Cerrillos