

Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council (AECCC)

Videoconference

Meeting Date

Thursday, September 16, 2021

Members:

Commissioner Adam Crum
Acting D.C. Heidi Teshner
Abbe Hensley
Anne Shade
Jenny Weissaupt (for Beverly Schoonover)
Brian Holst
Christie Reinhardt
Susan Kessler
Christina Hulquist
Stephanie Berglund
Supanika Ackerman
Trevor Storrs
Bridget Weiss
Elizabeth Siddon
Lori Grassgreen
Veronica Plumb

Guests:

Michele Binkley
Kathy Berry
Don Enoch
Rebekah Morisse
Jimael Johnson
Deb Riddle
Kim Kovol
Susan McKenzie
Meghan Johnson
Emily Ferry

Staff:

Kristen Spencer, DEED
Emily Urlacher, DHSS

Prepared by: Paula DiPaolo, Peninsula Reporting

CALL TO ORDER – 1:00 p.m.

Roll Call

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Following a videoconference briefing, Commissioner Crum welcomed attendees to the meeting. Roll call was taken, and guests were introduced.

APPROVAL OF PREVIOUS MEETING MINUTES

Trevor Storrs **MOVED** to approve the minutes from the June 16, 2021 meeting, **SECONDED** by Veronica Plumb. Hearing no objection, the motion **PASSED**, and the minutes were approved as presented.

NEW BUSINESS

Christina Hulquist proposed that the council start to look at the next step of the Early Childhood Strategic Plan that was adopted by AECCC. She suggested getting a group together to draft a charter for consideration at a future meeting. Stephanie Berglund was in favor of that suggestion and wondered if this would impact their subcommittee work, and she wanted that subject to be considered in the group's meetings. Emily Urlacher and Kristen Spencer will invite a group to write up a proposal on this matter for Commissioners Crum's and Johnson's review.

Both Rebekah Morisse and Abbe Hensley were hopeful that a proposal or at least the concept could be brought back to the council for discussion at the next meeting. Lori Grassgreen was also in favor of this item being on the agenda for the next meeting.

Kim Kovol, a special assistant in the Governor's office, introduced herself and itemized her portfolio as follows:

- Domestic violence/sexual assault
- Sex trafficking
- Human trafficking
- Homelessness
- Missing and murdered indigenous persons
- Opioids
- Early childhood education
- Child care
- OCS and foster care

Commissioner Crum welcomed Kim and stated that the Governor has taken an interest in child care because one thing that is universal is that it is difficult to reenter the workforce if there is a question about child care in your community. He is glad to see that Kim is involved in the child care process and thinks she will be a big help on that and other issues across the state.

ANNUAL HEAD START UPDATE

Supanika Ackerman stated that the Head Start grant is one of four grants that the AECCC plays an advisory role to. She introduced Anne Shade, Alaska Head Start Association representative to the council, who gave a presentation regarding the programs' activities during the last year.

Anne Shade, the child development department director at Bristol Bay Native Association, has been in her position almost 19 years and has been active in Head Start for all that time. She presented data for the '18/'19 school year because the reporting requirements were waived for the 2020 school year due to the COVID pandemic.

The data showed that total federal funding of \$15,726,365 plus total state funding of \$6,853,000 for 3,352 funded enrollment children is approximately \$17,783 per child.

She shared a map showing Head Start communities in Alaska in every corner of the state, many off the road system that present some special challenges.

Alaska Head Start / Early Head Start outcomes for '18/'19 show that almost 13 percent of Head Start children are special needs, and all of them received services under IDEA. In addition, only 22.48 percent of children were up to date on medical care at enrollment, and at the end of the school year, that number almost doubled to 53.11 percent. Alaska seems to have a pretty good handle on getting immunizations done, even in the Bush communities. Three-fourths of Head Start children received preventative dental care, and about 80 percent of children needing dental treatment have either received treatment or are receiving treatment.

The total families enrolled in '18/'19 were a bit over 3,500, and almost half of them were referred to and received family services including basic needs, health, mental health, parenting education, and job training. About 9 percent of the enrolled children experienced homelessness and about 7.5 percent were in foster care. Recently, she has noticed a lot of grandparents raising their grandchildren.

The graph of statewide Head Start kindergarten readiness outcomes shows improvement in all categories from the fall to the spring. Hopefully this year will be better, and there will be program information reports this year to share next year.

Nearly \$3 million federal CARES Act and ARP funds were provided for reaching more families, preparing facilities for in-person comprehensive services, supporting Head Start employees, and providing additional summer programming to make up for time lost in the classroom.

Some of the funds were used for the following purposes:

- PPE and sanitization: Masks, bleach, spray bottles, hand sanitizer, face masks, shields

- Technology to implement distance learning: Laptops for teachers, iPad or Hatch tablets for children
- Food boxes for families, to-go containers, grab-and-go foods not eligible for CACFP reimbursement
- Close contact / hazard pay increases
- Additional sick leave banks
- Additional staff to fill in for staff in quarantine or sick
- Mental health consultations with staff and families
- Sending PPE to families
- Rent for additional space to implement social distancing.

Additionally, they were able to work with the school districts to get most homes connected to the internet, which is something Bush Alaska has struggled with for a long time. Many programs were serving food to their families every day all last year. Some connected their families to the Food Banks, and some delivered hot meals to homes. CACFP was helpful working with all the programs trying to get food out and be able to get reimbursed for it.

It has been a very stressful time since the pandemic, not just for families but also for staff trying to keep the doors open. All programs bounced back and forth between in-person and virtual service delivery, all staying open as much as possible.

Some programs purchased Hatch tablets or iPads which were equipped with Ignite software, which is a digital learning platform. Data from the software is shared to the child's digital assessment portfolio in Teaching Strategies GOLD providing real-time school readiness progress updates to parents and teachers. Parents stayed involved in their child's education through platforms like the Creative Curriculum Cloud, Ready Rosie, and the Teaching Strategies Parent Portal as well as hard copy packets that were distributed to families.

One of the things the programs were able to do during the pandemic was allow time for staff to get their required trainings completed. One program reported they had over 2,000 hours of additional training they were able to get their people through during that time.

Christie Reinhardt asked if all the Early Head Start home visiting programs moved to virtual support. Anne Shade did not know but said she could find out.

Trevor Storrs gave a thank you to all the Head Starts for how they all came together to support families during this uncertain time.

Emily Urlacher asked if virtual or distance delivery using the internet to conduct classes was effective and if there was consistent turnout. Anne Shade replied that the situation was frustrating to everyone, but there was consistency in the distance delivery models used. But the children need to be in school, and figuring out how to get them in the classroom in a challenge.

Supanika Ackerman continued the annual Head Start update by stating that there are 17 different Head Start programs in the state, which make up about a \$52 million federal investment in Head Start. Through the Head Start collaboration grants, the funding comes directly to the state, and the collaboration grant office is housed at the Department of Education and Early Development and exists to provide information, resources, and leadership to support an excellent education for every student every day including our youngest early learners.

The DEED document “Meeting Alaska’s Education Challenge Together” is the result of parents, students, educators, policymakers, tribal leaders, partner organizations, partner organizations, and local school boards working together. The strategic priorities set out in that document are as follows:

1. Support all students to read at grade level by the end of third grade
2. Increase career, technical, and culturally relevant education to meet student and workforce needs
3. Close the achievement gap by ensuring equitable educational rigor and resources
4. Prepare, attract, and retain effective education professionals
5. Improve the safety and well-being of students through school partnerships with families, communities, and tribes.

The Head Start Collaboration Office exists to facilitate collaboration between Head Start agencies (including Early Head Start agencies) and entities that carry out activities designed to benefit low-income children from birth to school entry, and their families. The collaboration grants have been authorized since 1990 under Section 642(a)(2)(a) of the Head Start Act.

Each of the 50 states plus Puerto Rico and migrant seasonal programs and American Indian and Alaska Native programs has a collaboration grant. The grant runs in a noncompetitive five-year cycle, and the current cycle ends in 2022, making the due date of the next application July 1, 2022. The annual federal investment of \$125,000 comes to \$625,000 over the five-year cycle.

There are five national priorities that each of the 53 Head Start collaboration offices are trying to achieve.

1. Partner with state child care systems, emphasizing the Early Head Start-Child Care (EHS-CC) Partnership initiatives.

Nationally there is a shortage of child care services for children birth to three years, so to encourage collaborations between Early Head Start and child care, the Administration of Children and Families releases funds specifically geared to start and maintain partnerships between Early Head Start and child care programs.

2. Work with state efforts to collect data regarding early childhood programs and child outcomes.

There were no program information reports at the federal level during the last year; however, at the state level through the grant management system, some data was collected including how

many children are being served, and how many are homeless or in foster care. There are also statewide efforts regarding aligning and coordinating data including the Universal Developmental Screening Advisory Committee and working with the SEED registry.

3. Support the expansion and access of high quality, workforce, and career development opportunities for staff.

The collaboration office was able to update Alaska's Early Childhood Educator Core Knowledge and Competencies document which outlines the different skills and knowledge that early childhood educators need to have.

4. Collaboration with State Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS).

In Alaska, Learn & Grow is a quality recognition and improvement system to help programs ensure continuous quality improvement by having access to supports and professional development opportunities. Learn & Grow is currently housed at thread.

5. Work with state school systems to ensure continuity between Head Start and Kindergarten Entrance Assessment (KEA).

Alaska was part of the pilot program through the federal Office of Head Start that showcased promising practices in Head Start to school transitions. A copy of the final report is on the Head Start website.

In addition to the national priorities, there are regional priorities including the one dealing with a federal mandate for Head Start to conduct background checks prior to hiring. This background check rule is set to go into effect September 30th. Another regional priority is to make sure that Head Starts can be fully enrolled, and the goal is to have the children back in the classroom fully enrolled by January.

The Head Start Collaboration Office intersects with federal, state, and local entities. This grant is overseen by the Region X office in Seattle. There are more tribal programs in Alaska than non-tribal programs, and the Region XI collaboration office oversees all American Indian/Alaska Native programs across the nation. There are four non-tribal programs and 13 tribal grantees.

All collaboration offices have a monthly call where states can share innovative ways that their state systems are meeting the federal performance standards and can network, problem solve, and share resources.

Head Start programs are sometimes housed in school districts, in classrooms, or staffed with school district personnel, and all those collaborations are determined at the local level. Many Head Starts are home based rather than center based, so there are home visiting programs across the state. This collaboration office also intersects with the Department of Health and Social Services, the UAA system, Department of Education and Early Development, and thread which houses the statewide QRIS system.

The Head Start Collaboration Office completed the contract to update Alaska’s Early Childhood Core Knowledge & Competencies to align with the updated National Association for the Education of Young Children standards. The office also contracted to fund an office manager for the Alaska Head Start Association, which is the nonprofit that connects the 17 Head Start grantees in the state. The office also started a partnership with the University of Alaska Fairbanks and DEED on a statewide Career Technical Education Program of Study in Early Childhood.

A comparison of funded enrollments for Early Head Start from FY ’18 to FY ’21 showed an increase from 645 to 1,109. The home-based slots remained fairly stable at 65 and 68 percent, showing that there is a shortage of center-based care for the birth to three-year population.

An enrollment snapshot for Early Head Start for FY ’21 that compared the second quarter and fourth quarter showed a slight increase in the fourth quarter but was still lower than the funded enrollment.

An enrollment snapshot for Head Start showed pre-COVID (FY ’18) programming to be almost all center based. In FY ’21, the center-based programs were 54 percent and the home-based increased to 32 percent, while the combination virtual and in-person programming increased because of switching from in-person to virtual and back throughout that program year.

Emily Urlacher asked what kind of issues or barriers the directors have reported coming into this new school year. Anne Shade replied that the Delta variant is having a huge impact. Of her four communities, three are in complete lockdown, and people are trying to figure out how to keep the doors open. Some staff is out on quarantine or they’re sick, and one week she didn’t have enough staff to stay open, but the next week staffing levels were high but the children were absent.

ALL ALASKA PEDIATRIC PARTNERSHIP BI-ANNUAL IMPACT REPORT

Acting Deputy Commissioner Heidi Teshner explained that the presentation from the All Alaska Pediatric Partnership had been canceled.

**CHILD CARE PROGRAM OFFICE CHILD CARE DEVELOPMENT FUND (CCDF)
PLAN AND FUNDING UPDATE**

Christina Hulquist provided an update on the Child Care Development Fund, which has been finalized for 2022 through 2024 and will go into effect this October. It will be posted on the website once it is restored, but if anyone wants it prior to that, she can send one.

The plan was developed through stakeholder sessions with a wide array of stakeholder groups including AECCC, Learn & Grow, Early Childhood Advocacy group, tribal representation, Head Start Association, and more. Christina has been designated as the CCDF lead administrator, and she noted the CCDF monitoring is nearing completion for FY ’19/’21.

The Market Price Survey plan has been completed. This is the survey used to set rates for child care assistance. In the past, they had experienced low participation in the survey, which led to inaccurate results. This year CCPO partnered with ISER at UAA to conduct two market price surveys in November 2020 and March 2021. Two informational meetings with thread were held to review those results in the draft Child Care Assistance Program rate schedule. The next steps will be a public comment period and public hearing, and then the rate schedule and the family income and contribution schedule is drafted in the same regulation package.

Alaska received federal relief funds for child care through the American Rescue Pan Act (ARPA) and the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA). Of the \$73 million ARPA funding, \$45 million was allocated for child care stabilization and \$28 million for supplemental discretionary funds to expand access to high quality child care. These two funding sources will help to meet current and immediate needs and will allow investigating strategies for long-term sustainability.

Supports that are under way include the following:

- Extended free training offered by thread
- SEED Roots wage bonus awards
- Increased scholarship funding to the university to assist the workforce in accessing higher education
- Working on improvement to the Child Care Assistance Program
- Implemented phase 1 of stabilization grants.

Applications for the first round of stabilization grants opened on September 1st, and over half of the eligible providers have applied so far. This first round awards \$5 million of the \$45 million ARPA funds for stabilization, and payments to providers will range from \$5,500 to \$11,500 based on licensed capacity. The application and instructions are available online through thread's website, and she encouraged everyone to share this information with providers to reach the goal of 100 percent participation. Allowable uses of the funds include rent or mortgage, utilities, facility maintenance and improvements, personnel costs, benefits, recruitment and retention efforts, personal protective equipment, goods and services necessary to maintain or resume child care services, mental health support for children and employees, and investment in technology to respond to COVID-19 challenges.

Another federal requirement is data collection regarding monthly expenses which will help paint a picture to help with the framing of the subsequent phases of the stabilization grant. Other federal requirements have a focus on serving nontraditional hours, serving children with disabilities, low-income families, infant and toddler care, and low supply or underserved communities.

The phase 2 stabilization grant applications should be out sometime between January and March of 2022 and will be framed based on information gathered from the first applications. One

question asked was if one or two larger payments or smaller payments over time would best support their stabilization. Hopefully, the phase 2 funding will be more than in phase 1.

They are working on developing a high-level plan for the relief funds and are being guided by the current CCDF plan and Alaska's Early Childhood Strategic Direction as well as other resources. The plan will have strategies sorted into categories such as affordability and subsidy, licensing and access to licensed care, quality support, and infrastructure. Hopefully, the funding plan will be shared with the public by the end of the calendar year.

Abbe Hensley asked if there was a deadline for spending the funds. She also asked if the public's complaint about having to pay for a whole month when a child is in care for only a portion of the time could be a part of the communication plan about stabilization. Christina Hulquist replied that there are different obligate and spending deadlines, but the first plan is due September 2022, and the funds need to be spent by 2023. She added that they have been putting out messages and information about market price survey.

Abbe Hensley pointed out how COVID may affect families because sometimes the child care facilities have to close. She wondered if it was up to the provider to explain the reasons to people or if there was another way to communicate that. Christina said they were trying to defer to the CDC and current edicts, and child care providers are putting together mitigation plans. Other strategies include paying based on enrollment instead of attendance, so even if the child does not show up, the provider can still be paid, or contracting for slots so the provider is paid even if the slot is not filled. Another problem is the smaller workforce, which could force providers to turn away new children in order to keep up with their ratios.

Anne Shade commented that she had to send children home because one of the teachers tested positive, and the parents were upset because they had to pay for the slot even though it was the provider who sent the children home.

Brian Holst commented that there are more job openings in America than people looking for work. Child care plays a role in letting people go back to work, so he urged for release of the funds sooner rather than later so that the providers can make decisions about their businesses. He wondered at what pace the remaining \$40 million will be released. Christina Hulquist responded that there is about \$30 million left to be distributed to providers, and they will try to get the next phase out sometime in January to March. Most of the applicants so far prefer small payments over time rather than larger but fewer payments. Also, there are other strategies outside of the stabilization grants to help child care providers like the SEED Registry ROOTS Award.

Stephanie Berglund said that thread is happy to help in processing the stabilization grants and helping to distribute the funds which should be going out later this month. She added that over half of the applicants so far have said they feel at risk of closure. She also wondered if there were other education stimulus funds specifically for early childhood that might be available.

Christina also heard that there is an Alaska ARPA website that has a lot of information in one place, so that might be a place to start to look for other opportunities.

PROGRAM UPDATES

Stephanie Berglund invited the group to the fourth Early Care and Learning Economic Impact Summit to be held on December 9th. The theme this year is Taking Big Strides for Child Care, and it will be a virtual event. The focus will be on the latest research and will feature guests from across the country who will share innovative ideas to strengthen child care infrastructure, investment, and support.

Brian Holst announced a relief program through the state Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development, AK ARPA Business Relief Program. It opens tomorrow and could be another opportunity for some child care operators to get some relief.

Abbe Hensley let the group know that the First Ladies' Tea which was scheduled for this month will not be taking place because they felt that the COVID numbers were too high. Also, she has a lot of learning activity booklets that are based on the early learning guidelines and can send them to interested persons. She also received a summer camps grant and created one of the Little Learners virtual camps. She has backpacks available full of materials for that camp and also has some scholarship funds available.

Susan Kessler said that the ILP ARPA funding is coming up, which comes from the Part C system and is a little different from the other funds mentioned. They will be focusing on recruitment and retention, loan repayment, higher bonuses for staff, staff training, public awareness, and child identification activities.

Emily Urlacher asked Brian Holst for a link to the funding information he had mentioned. He said it is from the DCCED website.

Supanika Ackerman congratulated Dr. Weiss who was named superintendent of the year and featured in Time Magazine.

ADJOURN

Heidi Teshner thanked Emily Urlacher and Kristen Spencer for providing information beforehand for this meeting and thanked everyone for attending, and without objection adjourned the meeting at 3:00 p.m.