

Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council (AECCC)

Videoconference

Meeting Date

Thursday, September 8, 2022

Minutes

Members Present:

Commissioner Adam Crum
Acting Commissioner Heidi Teshner
Abbe Hensely
Mack Wood for Christie Reinhardt
Christina Hulquist
Elizabeth Siddon
Stephanie Berglund
Supanika Ordoñez
Trevor Storrs
Veronica Plumb
Susan Kessler
Anne Shade
Matthew Hirschfeld
Bev Schoonover
Amber Vaska

Guests:

Tamar Ben-Yosef
Jenni Pollard
Betsy Larson
Chelsea Burke
Jimael Johnson
Meghan Johnson
Stefanie O'Brien
Susan McKenzie
Diane Peck
Amie Collins

Staff:

Kristen Spencer, DEED
Emily Urlacher, DHSS

Prepared by: Paula DiPaolo, Peninsula Reporting

CALL TO ORDER – 1:00 P.M.

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Following a videoconference briefing, Commission 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 13, 2022 meeting, **SECONDED** by Matthew Hirschfeld. Hearing no discussion nor objection, the motion **PASSED**.

DEED EARLY LEARNING UPDATE

Susan McKenzie, director of the Division of Innovation and Education Excellence with the Department of Education, updated the Council on Alaska's Strategic Reading Plan and Reads Act Updates. She stated that the first priority of the Alaska's Education Challenge, *Support all students to read at grade level by the end of third grade*, was the priority that propelled the Reads Act into place.

Alaska Reads Act Components:

Programs to Implement:

1. Pre-K/Early Learning and Parents as Teachers
2. Department Reading Program
3. District Reading Improvement
4. Virtual Education.

Reads Act Embedded into DEED's Strategic Reading Plan:

1. Professional development – District Reading Improvement
2. Evidence-based materials
3. Early literacy – Pre-K/Early Learning and Parents as Teachers
4. Frameworks for success – Virtual Education and Department Reading Program
5. Science of Reading Resources, Data, and Communication – Reporting/data collections
6. Teacher preparation.

Director McKenzie explained that the Strategic Reading Plan is in draft form and will continue to evolve as they adapt to the needs of districts and people across the state. She highlighted Strategy 3 – Early learning components as follows:

- Secure and implement a statewide literacy screener with progress monitoring and dyslexia screener. Provide training. (Reads Act)
- Train and implement Teaching Strategies GOLD assessments to pre-K and Head Start programs.
- Reads Act Early Education Program
- Reads Act Parents as Teachers
- Update Alaska Developmental Profile.

Early Education Draft Regulations Process:

- Committee meets each week led by Deb Riddle.
- Draft regulations written.
- Advisory committee formed for feedback on early education issues, such as Early Education Program Standards.
- Survey and draft regulations have been sent to stakeholder groups.
- Stakeholder Engagement Panel Discussion set for September 12 – 16.
- Public meeting notice on the DEED website under Alaska Reads webpage.

Director McKenzie reviewed the Read Act implementation timeline for the 2022/2023 school year. She noted that the regulations need to be finalized February 15th for the State Board of Education meeting in March. She apologized for the tight timelines to provide feedback. She also highlighted that 14 positions will be associated with the Read Act to support early learning.

Based on a question from Stephanie Berglund, Director McKenzie explained that the Early Education Advisory Committee is comprised of people in DEED. The Advisory Committee has been newly formed, and although she doesn't have the names of the members yet, she will ask Deb Riddle to post them on the website.

Abbe Hensley asked what the Advisory Committee was working on, and Director McKenzie noted that their focus between now and December is on the standards. Kristen Spencer added that their purpose is to have statewide early childhood education representation to advise on any DEED proposed policies or regulations that will affect the early education programs, so it's not just for the Reads Act. The first topic they are addressing is the early education program standards that are required from the Alaska Reads Act, and in January the next topic is scheduled is to be discussing the definition of kindergarten readiness.

Abbe further asked if the work of this Advisory Committee will be different than the work of the AECCC with its committees and charter. Kristen Spencer noted that the AECCC committees are not operating, and the charter has not been approved yet. This is an immediate need for DEED to address, which is why the Advisory Committee was created.

ANNUAL HEAD START UPDATE

Supanika Ordoñez reported that the Head Start Collaboration Offices (HSCO) are in all 50 states. This is a five-year, non-competitive grant, and Alaska's five-year grant ends September 30th. Reapplication was due July 1st, and although they haven't heard back yet, they anticipate starting their project period October 1. This grant is given to each state to help facilitate partnerships between Head Start programs and different entities that serve families and children from birth to age 5.

Update on 2021-2022 Activities:

- COVID-19 response Zoom with DHSS
- Childcare Program Office outreach
- Early Childhood Career Technical Education Program of Study
- Monthly Community of Practice with pre-elementary.
- Alaska Head Start Association virtual assistant contract 7/1/22 – 6/30/23.

Anne Shade displayed a graphic showing where the Head Starts are located statewide and highlighted the following data from her presentation:

Funding:

- Federal funding statewide increased \$884/child; state funding decreased \$68/child.
- Average cost per child went up.

Health Outcomes:

- Decrease of 11.6 percent of kids being up to date on their medical care.
- Massive decrease of up-to-date immunizations across the state.
- Dental care – decrease of 25.66 percent.
- Decrease in the number of children with special needs being served across the state.

Family Services Outcomes:

- 8.8 percent of kids served are in foster care, which is an increase.
- Overall decrease of 1,152 families in the program.
- Over 77 percent of families access family services through their Head Start programs (basic needs; housing assistance; and health, parenting, and nutrition education).

Staff Qualifications:

- A little less than half of Head Start teachers statewide meet the minimum qualifications.
- Almost 53 percent of the assistant teachers have zero qualifications.
- 89 percent of Head Start education managers meet the minimum qualifications.

Kindergarten Readiness Outcomes Data:

- Despite the interruptions due to COVID, children were improving their kindergarten readiness scores, but they also have a long way to go to be meeting or exceeding those standards in time for kindergarten.

Enrollment Data:

- Early Head Start – 84 percent serving their funded enrollment.
- Head Start – serving 75 percent of the funded enrollment.
- 2019 Program Information Report (PIR) did not have a question regarding staff accessing mental health services, but the 2021 PIR did. 56 percent of Head Start staff accessed mental health professionals during the school year.

Staffing Challenges – PIR Data:

- Almost 20 percent (177) of the Head Start staff quit during the last program year. Of those, a little over half were refilled. There are currently 74 open positions across the state.
- Of those that quit, 106 were classroom staff or home visitors. 64 positions were filled leaving 42 classroom positions unfilled.
- 53 percent of staff that quit left early childhood and switched fields.
- 13 percent left for higher compensation; half of whom went to work for the state pre-K or another early childhood education field.

Salary Disparity Between Head Start and School District Staff:

- Average salary – Head Start teacher with a BA - \$43,652
- Average salary – school district teacher with a BA - \$73,000
- Average salary – Head Start teacher’s aide - \$31,000
- Directors report the main reason for low enrollment is staffing challenges caused by:
 - Lack of qualified applicants
 - Low wages
 - Difficult work
 - Other

Current Data from Directors Statewide:

- 23 teacher positions are still open.
- Only two grantees have all their teachers; four grantees have all their teacher’s aides.
- 21 teacher’s aide positions open statewide.
- 358 unfilled slots in Head Start and 66 in Early Head Start. This is a direct correlation to not having adequate staffing.

Anne Shade shared comments she received regarding closures and delays due to staffing.

Income Guidelines Contributing to Low Enrollment Numbers

Income guidelines are a huge problem in Alaska. The Head Start income guidelines are exactly the same as the federal poverty level, and the Anchorage poverty rates are the same as the entire state. One Tribal organization tried to put in a waiver for the income guidelines and was refused. Anne Shade stated that a single mom with a child can’t make over \$11.01 per hour or they are over income for Head Start. She believes that as a state, they need to advocate to the federal government for a differentiation between the urban and rural programs. Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association doesn’t have a single family who is eligible for Head Start. Everyone is over income.

Anne Shade provided the Council with last remarks from directors about the struggles of their positions.

Supanika Ordoñez remarked that recently the Office of Head Start has allowed for SNAP benefits to be one of the eligibility requirements, and SNAP guidelines serve a wider income range than the traditional federal poverty guidelines. She asked Anne if that has been helpful at all for the programs. Anne responded that she thinks it will help, but right now they are trying to

figure out how to prove people are on SNAP. She is also trying to follow up with APIA because they are saying they don't have access to TANF or SNAP down on the chain.

Supanika Ordoñez then reviewed PIR data with the Council. She noted that much of the information will be similar to Anne Shade's data, but hers will be focusing on multiyear trends. The data is available publicly on the Head Start website, but there is no data for 2020.

Trends 2018 – 2021

- Funded enrollment has increased.
- Cumulative enrollment has decreased.
- Percentage of employed families or families receiving schooling or training served by Head Start has remained the same.
- Percentage of homeless families has remained about the same.
- Higher percentage of students served who are in foster care.
- Less children referred from welfare agencies this year.
- Pre-COVID program services were more on parent education, asset building, job training and adult education, but now they are focusing on screening and assessment, medical services, and nutrition services.
- Number of staff has decreased for teachers, assistants, home visitors, and education and child development coordinators. There was an increase in the number of family and community partnership staff.
- The percentage of staff who are current or former Head Start parents remains relatively high.
- Numbers of credentialed staff have decreased over the years.

Child Outcome Data

- Children are starting Head Start below the literacy range, and programs are able to make good growth in literacy through the year. The sample size was very small, only 13 Head Start programs.
- Teaching Strategies will be used in 23 school districts and 16 Head Start programs across the state.

Alaska Developmental Profile (ADP) 11-year trends:

ADP has 13 goals that children are expected to be able to know, which are based on the widely held expectations of the Alaska Early Learning Guidelines. They have started looking at what percentage of children are demonstrating at least 11 of the 13 goals to be kindergarten ready.

The 11-year trend shows that the numbers have been pretty consistent, though they dropped slightly after the pandemic. They are hoping to turn around the next ADP results by early November of this year.

ANNUAL HELP ME GROUP ALASKA PROGRAM UPDATE

Carmen Wenger, program director for Help Me Grow Alaska (HMG-AK), explained that Help Me Grow is a program of the All Alaska Pediatric Partnership (A2P2).

All Alaska Pediatric Partnership Strategic Goals:

1. Foster an internal and external culture of data use to set priorities and drive decision making.
 - HMG-AK feeds data up to A2P2 through data gathered in the centralized access point (CAP) and outreach to inform organizational work and support partners.
2. Build connections and foster trusting relationships among providers, partners, and policymakers to close gaps in the system of care.
 - HMG-AK outreach is conducted at the family, community, and child healthcare provider level to make sure each level of stakeholders can connect to the resources they need.
3. Be a leading advocate to improve coordination and access to healthcare and related services for Alaska's children and families.
 - The work of HMG-AK informs what is needed to improve the systems of care through the direct service interactions with providers and families.
4. Strengthen internal infrastructure and capacity of A2P2 to fulfill its mission.

2021 Program Evaluation

- HMG-AK broke its record for most contacts served. In comparison to 2020, almost twice as many contacts were served in 2021.
- CAP staff did a great job of satisfying families in 2021. Family experience improved in every category, and 90 percent of families reported that their needs were met.
- Fewer outreach events occurred, but more people were reached than in previous years. This signals that outreach efforts are becoming more efficient.
- HMG-AK is growing the Early Childhood Network (ECN). By 2021, it represented 22 communities with 12 official ECN members serving as champions.
- Partners and community members believed HMG-AK contributes to system changes in Alaska. Examples of system improvements include community linkages through the ECN and increased community knowledge.

Key Milestones

- Reaching full fidelity with HMG National
- A full year of managing the HMG-AK CAP in house
- Breaking another HMG-AK record for most contacts served
- Enhancing family experiences with the CAP
- Growing the ECN to 22 locations
- Publishing the CDC Milestone books that were adapted to Alaska.

Recommendations from the Program Evaluation

1. Increase CAP capacity
2. Define the target audience
3. Engage families
4. Enhance data systems
5. Invest in ongoing equity training.

Case Numbers from the CAP

- 65 cases opened in the last 30 days
- 592 cases opened year to date
- 511 cases last year
- 272 cases in 2020
- 1,705 total HMG-AK cases.

Caller Type/Location

- Primarily mothers; second is fathers
- Seeing an uptick in calls from foster parents.
- Calls are received statewide and sometimes from out of state.
- Majority of calls come from Southcentral, which tracks with the population.

Age of Child – 2018 – 2022

2020 saw a wider age distribution, and they started seeing a larger increase in adolescent calls. In 2021 they saw the largest increase in their early childhood numbers. 2022 is seeing a more even distribution of early childhood calls.

Primary Reason for Call

- 2022 year to date – 44 percent mental health/neuropsych evaluation/behavior.
- Prior to the pandemic, most of the calls were developmental related.

Resource Directory – Community resources by type:

- 496 Medical or health services
- 260 Mental health services
- 225 Social services agency
- 149 Educational institution
- 119 Advocacy organization
- 116 Recreational organization

Most Common System Barriers for Families

- Waitlists are too long
- Providers not calling back
- Scheduling conflicts
- Health insurance not accepted
- Providers not able to take new cases/clients/patients
- Clients needs exceed the capacity of the provider
- Difficulty with staff person
- Location of service
- Cost prohibitive.

Learn the Signs. Act Early.

- Milestone checklists – customized for different regions of the state
- Milestone moments booklet

- Amazing Books adapted for Alaska with milestones highlighted throughout the stories. Parent section includes age-appropriate milestones, tips, when to act early.

Year-2 Projects

- Continued work on the Developmental Screening Companion Document project
- Creation of a Head Start Toolkit for parent engagement on developmental screening
- Expanded dissemination of print materials from year 1.
- Creating video companions for Amazing Books as a parent resource tool.

CDC Milestones Checklists

Revisions were completed in 2019 and publication of the process and results in February 2022.

HMG-AK in the News

HMG National Center released its Building Impact report for 2021. HMG-AK was one of the six affiliates highlighted in the report for work advancing equity between access to the system through innovations in outreach to narrow the urban and rural gap.

ALASKA MENTAL HEALTH TRUST AUTHORITY BUDGET PROPOSALS

Jimael Johnson thanked members of the Council for contributing feedback to the Trust’s FY’24/’25 budget. She reviewed a spreadsheet with attendees outlining pertinent early childhood budget items that were approved by the Trustees a couple of weeks ago.

Jimael explained that they have structured their budget for this section according to the Comprehensive Integrated Mental health Plan.

1. Promote practice-informed universal screening efforts and early intervention services.
 - Keep the Kids Home – pediatric behavioral health services and supports - \$50K
 - Children’s mental health conferences - \$50K
 - Help Me Grow Alaska: Community outreach, care coordination, and developmental screening - \$150K
 - Ages & Stages Questionnaire, 4th Ed. - \$140K
 - Intensive at-risk early intervention services for foster/child welfare involved families - \$460K

Amber Vaska asked if the intervention services include children under tribal custody. Jimael Johnson stated that this funding is not exclusive to foster or child welfare involved families, but they will have a prioritization. The positions will be within the infant learning programs (ILP) that already exist around the state, so it would include all the children and families those ILPs are currently serving. Amber further asked if tribal organizations that have an ILP within their structure are eligible to apply for this funding. Jimael suggested she contact Senior and Disabilities Services to check with them as they are administering the funds. Susan Kessler indicated in the chat that they are eligible to apply.

2. Ensure accurate identification of social-emotional needs for children and their caregivers.
 - Project transform mental health consultation in schools - \$150K

- Trauma-engaged schools PBIS coaching - \$120K
 - Infant and early childhood mental health capacity building - \$400K
3. Reduce instances and impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
- Improve social determinants of health for families and young children, parenting and family supports, home visiting and related programs - \$265K
 - Foster care and child welfare systems improvements - \$500K
 - Flex funds for transition-aged foster youth - \$100K/\$150K
 - Early childhood governance – public/private partnership - \$50K
 - Kinship foster caregiver support - \$150K
 - Family Services Training Center, 1115 early childhood services implementation - \$200K
 - Foster care youth transition coordinator - \$135K
 - Foster care health record linkage - \$100K
 - ACEs data linkage and analysis - \$100K

AECCC CHARTER DRAFT PROPOSAL

Commissioner Crum apologized and explained to the Council that due to a number of factors, they were unable to conduct working groups on the charter draft since the last meeting. He stated that he is committed to hearing dialog from the AECCC membership on the charter and noted that he has now put Becky Morisse from Women’s, Children’s, and Family Health as the lead on this project to ensure it moves forward.

Emily Urlacher refreshed the Council that a year ago, an AECCC member requested that they integrate into their work the strategic direction the Council adopted. The first tasks a working group determined needed to happen were to update the bylaws and make a charter and ensure the strategic direction language is in that document. The charter is a proposal to update the AECCC in its current form as it is now. Anything related to early childhood governance beyond that is a completely separate group.

Emily Urlacher screen shared and reviewed the draft charter and noted that Becky Morisse and AECCC staff will be hosting meetings for Council members to provide more detailed feedback. Christina Hulquist added that instead of having two separate documents, they incorporated the bylaws into this draft charter document.

Emily reviewed the guiding principles as follows:

- The AECCC will work collaboratively and collectively with tribal, local, state, and national entities to encourage the greatest possible positive impact for children and families.
- The AECCC will encourage work within the early childhood field to make sure it's consistent with current best practice and research.
- The AECCC will ensure communication within the AECCC that is timely, consistent with its bylaws, and made available to public as appropriate.

- The AECCC will coordinate work consistent with the strategic direction, its goals, objectives, and strategies.

Emily Urlacher continued on reviewing the document and touched on the following topics:

- Lead agency
- Structure and member responsibility
- Membership
- AECCC committees
- Responsibilities of each committee chair
- Responsibilities of committee members
- Co-coordinators and duties
- Quarterly meetings
- Charter amendments

Abbe Hensley stated that there was hard work put in by members of this workgroup. She thanked Emily and everyone involved.

Emily Urlacher explained that Becky Morisse, Commissioner Crum, Kristen Spencer, and herself will schedule some meetings with AECCC membership to review this in more detail and to receive input. Commissioner Crum stated that they need to get this document into a more finalized version so they can then bring it forward for a vote at the next meeting.

PROGRAM UPDATES OR NEW BUSINESS

Abbe Hensley thanked everyone who has participated in the AECCC these many years. She discussed the group's inception and noted that although they've struggled over the years, they have always gotten through it and worked to have a greater understanding of the early childhood environment. She stated this is her last AECCC meeting as the official representative of Best Beginnings. She thanked everyone for allowing her to be a part of this group. Commissioner Crum thanked and appreciated all of her service to the Council and all of the valuable feedback she has provided. Stephanie Berglund stated that this group would not be what it is today without Abbe Hensley's great leadership and input.

Stephanie Berglund stated that thread will be starting a new child care initiative in partnership with the Rasmuson Foundation, which is in direct relation to the Early Childhood Strategic Direction. The two key priorities will be building an implementation plan around the access goals and objectives and the workforce. She stated that once the AECCC committees take shape, she would like to make sure they coordinate with this.

Stephanie Berglund stated that this year thread is working closely with the Child Care Program Office to implement some initiatives with the COVID-19 federal stimulus relief dollars. They are hiring several consultants and have several RFPs out.

Stephanie Berglund also noted that she saw on the national level there is an opportunity for another preschool development grant that Alaska would be eligible for. Emily Urlacher stated

that they are aware that Alaska is eligible to apply, but the details have not been released, so they are keeping an eye on it. As soon as they get more information, they will ask the AECCC membership for support if they choose to pursue it.

Amber Vaska stated that there aren't a lot of opportunities for child care and early learning in the villages in Alaska, so they are working to pilot a program in Galena, in partnership with the school district, where they can creatively use their Head Start and child care funds to be able to fund an Early Head Start. They are going to start hopefully next year.

Commissioner Crum stated that they are working on items internal to the department on the child care side and working to try to get the legislature more involved in this process. He reminded Council members that the legislature is a minimum 40 percent turnover this year, so the department has been working on the educational aspects for new legislators. He noted that a number of legislators have expressed an interest in childcare, so Commissioner Crum suggested a handful of AECCC members getting together with some legislators to let them know who they are and what they do. He believes it would really help if they can do some of this education up front prior to the session.

ADJOURN

Commissioner Crum thanked everyone for attending, and the meeting adjourned at 3:50 p.m.