



Southern Regional Action Plan to Improve the Quality of Early Care and Education

Survey on the Status of Implementation Efforts

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* Florida did not respond to the survey in 2003. The following data is for actions taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004 only.

Goal 1: All children and families will have the benefit of a quality, comprehensive and coordinated early care and education system.

1.1 Public policy at the federal, state and local level will require planning and coordination across major systems to improve quality, including Head Start, state pre-kindergarten, subsidized child care and licensing.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Florida Statutes 411.01(3)(a) states “each coalition’s school readiness program shall have available to it funding from all the coalition’s early education and child care programs that are funded with state, federal, lottery, or local funds, including but not limited to Florida First Start programs, Even Start literacy programs, pre-kindergarten early intervention programs, Head Start programs, programs offered by public and private providers of child care, migrant pre-kindergarten programs, Title I programs, subsidized child care programs, and teen parent programs, together with any additional funds appropriated or obtained for this section. These programs and their funding streams shall be components of the coalition’s integrated school readiness program, with the goal of preparing children for success in school.”

Chapter 411.01 also established a board with members appointed by the Governor and include an agency representative from the Department of Education, the Department of Children and Family Services, the Department of Health, the Chair of the Child Care Executive Partnership Board, and the Chair of the Board of Directors of Workforce Florida, Inc., as well as the Lieutenant Governor and 14 other appointees from the public.

The Florida Partnership for School Readiness (Partnership) supports the Head Start State Collaborative Office with in-kind support, including office space, copy materials, fax machines, etc. In addition, the Partnership staff stays in close contact with staff from the Department of Education and the Department of Children and Families who also work with early childhood programs.

1.2 Public policy at the federal, state and local level will support families by linking early care and education programs to health coverage, physical and mental health care, nutrition, economic support, transportation and parenting education services.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Florida has established a seamless transition for families as they transition through their early childhood education. Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Act through the Department of Health provides families of high-risk and disabled newborn infants with training and support services identified in the hospital. Developmental evaluation and intervention services are at all hospitals providing Level II and Level III neonatal intensive care services. These services continue until the child reaches age 3.

When the child reaches age 3, Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Act through the Department of Education provides families with early intervention, educational, and transitional services and results for children with disabilities through coordinated

research and personnel preparation. Families are supported through technical assistance, support, and dissemination of information.

Florida's Diagnostic and Learning Resources System provides support services to school district exceptional student education programs statewide. The service has the following four functions: Child Find; Human Resources Development; Parent Services; and Technology. Activities focus on enhancement of learner outcomes, partnerships between families and professionals, early identification of disabilities and evaluation, in-service training, instructional technology, interagency services, and implementation of state educational goals and priorities. Services are available to district, agency, community and other personnel working with students with disabilities and their families.

Florida Kid Care offers low-cost health insurance for uninsured children from birth through 18. A child is eligible if they do not have health insurance, are under age 19 are U.S. citizens or qualified non-citizens, are not dependents of a state employee and their family meets the income guidelines. Florida currently serves over 1.5 million kids through this program.

Inclusion Specialists are hired through the local School Readiness Coalitions to work closely with these agencies providing services for children being served in school readiness programs. Florida's Developmental Disabilities Council, through their Inclusive Child Care Strategic Plan, has developed a five-year plan that will result in the expansion of quality, affordable and accessible child care services in community-based settings for a wide range of children with disabilities. The plan includes infants, toddlers, preschoolers and school-aged children. Community-based settings would include child care programs, after-school programs and early childhood programs.

Project STEPS (Sequenced Transition to Education in the Public Schools) through the Department of Education is a statewide initiative which has developed a community wide transition system to help families move from one environment to another for programs and services. Project STEPS purpose is to coordinate local, regional, and state-wide activities which will enhance a community's ability to develop a seamless transition process for pregnant women, families, and their children birth to age six years who use prevention, early intervention, and school services. Project STEPS helps those children transitioning from Early Intervention Program, Part C, into other programs within the community. Children and families in early childhood programs go through a variety of changes such as changes in programs (i.e. the hospital to the home; an early intervention program to a preschool; a home-based program to a center based program; a preschool program to a school age program); changes in curriculum style and structure, classrooms, teachers, or therapist.

Local School Readiness Coalitions through their eligibility application process help parents team up with the right resources in their communities. In addition, children are screened upon entry to identify need for further evaluation or additional resources.

1.3 *Federal, state and local policies and systems will ensure coordinated, seamless transitions for children moving among early care and education programs and into kindergarten.*

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Project STEPS is a statewide initiative which has developed a community wide transition system to help families move from one environment to another for programs and services. Project STEPS purpose is to coordinate local, regional, and state-wide activities which will enhance a community's ability to develop a seamless transition process for pregnant women, families, and their children birth to age six years who use prevention, early intervention, and school services. Project STEPS helps those children transitioning from Early Intervention Program, Part C, into other programs within the community. Children and families in early childhood programs go through a variety of changes such as changes in programs (i.e. the hospital to the home; an early intervention program to a preschool; a home-based program to a center based program; a preschool program to a school age program); changes in curriculum style and structure, classrooms, teachers, or therapist.

In addition, the Partnership has developed and published developmental and performance standards for children ages birth to five that align with the expectations provided in the Florida Sunshine Standards for grades K to 12.

Goal 2: Rigorous licensing requirements and/or regulatory processes will be enacted to ensure that children are adequately protected in all early care and education settings.

2.1 *States will establish staff-child ratios and maximum group sizes for centers and homes that meet NAEYC¹, NAFCC² or APHA³ /AAP⁴ national standards.*

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

For children from birth through 1 year of age, there must be one child care personnel for every four children.

For children 1 year of age or older, but under 2 years of age, there must be one child care personnel for every six children.

For children 2 years of age or older, but under 3 years of age, there must be one child care personnel for every 11 children.

For children 3 years of age or older, but under 4 years of age, there must be one child care personnel for every 15 children.

For children 4 years of age or older, but under 5 years of age, there must be one child care personnel for every 20 children.

For children 5 years of age or older, there must be one child care personnel for every 25 children.

When children 2 years of age and older are in care, the staff-to-children ratio shall be based on the age group with the largest number of children within the group.

Ratios for Family Day Care Homes are established in section 402.302(7), Florida Statutes, as follows:

A maximum of four children from birth to 12 months of age.

A maximum of three children from birth to 12 months of age, and other children, for a maximum total of six children.

A maximum of six preschool children if all are older than 12 months of age.

A maximum of 10 children if no more than 5 are preschool age and, of those 5, no more than 2 are under 12 months of age.

2.2 States will develop and enforce health, fire and safety requirements for all early childhood care and education settings that reflect standards set forth by the APHA and the AAP.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Section 402.305, Florida Statutes (1) states "(a) The standards shall be designed to address the following areas:

1. The health, sanitation, safety, and adequate physical surroundings for all children in child care.
2. The health and nutrition of all children in child care.
3. The child development needs of all children in child care.

(b) All standards established under ss. 402.301-402.319 must be consistent with the rules adopted by the State Fire Marshal for child care facilities. However, if the facility is operated in a public school, the department shall use the public school fire code, as provided in the rules of the State Board of Education, as the minimum standard for fire safety."

2.3 State law will require strict enforcement of licensing requirements. States will use a range of sanctions that will include license revocation when a provider is unable or unwilling to meet requirements.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Section 402.310, Florida Statutes, defines the range of sanctions that the Florida Department of Children and Families Services may impose if violations of licensing standards occur. The department may deny, suspend, or revoke a license or impose an administrative fine for the violation of any licensing standards outlined in statute or rule. In determining the appropriate disciplinary action to be taken for a violation of licensing standards the severity of the violation, actions taken by the licensee to correct the violation and any previous violations of the licensee shall be considered.

From July 1, 2003, through June 30, 2004, the department imposed administrative fines on 64 child care entities for licensing violations; 5 licenses were suspended and 7 were revoked.

2.4 States will conduct at least three unannounced monitoring visits per year to verify compliance with requirements.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

One of the Performance Measures for Child Care Services is that all facilities receive 3 inspections per year. The Child Care Service Quality Assurance Team is currently in the process of monitoring for compliance of this standard.

2.5 States will require that child care providers, early childhood teachers and others who have regular access to children in early childhood settings have federal and state background checks using fingerprinting and screening against the state child abuse registry.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Section 402.305(2), Florida Statutes, states that "Minimum standards for child care personnel shall include minimum requirements as to: (a) Good moral character based upon screening. This screening shall be conducted as provided in chapter 435, using the level 2 standards for screening set forth in that chapter."

2.6 States will ensure that all licensing and early care and education staff are educated in recognizing signs of child abuse and are trained in the state's child abuse reporting laws.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

The 2003 Legislature passed the Rilya Wilson Act to ensure that "children who are currently in care of the state be provided with an age-appropriate education program to help ameliorate the negative consequences of abuse, neglect, and abandonment." Section, 39.604, Florida Statutes, requires that children who are 3 years old to school entry must be enrolled to participate in the school readiness programs five days a week. In addition, the Legislature established strict guidelines for attendance. Programs are required to report any unexcused absence or seven consecutive excused absences to the Family Safety Program Office of the Department of Children and Family Services.

This new law set a new priority group for local coalitions. Coalitions first serve children from families receiving TANF, and children between the ages of three and five (or school entry) that have been referred for child care services due to abuse or neglect.

In addition, section 402.305(2), Florida Statutes, states that minimum training requirements for child care personnel must include the identification and reporting of child abuse and neglect. This topic makes up 4-clock-hours classroom instruction in the department's approved 40-clock-hour introductory course which is required training for all child care personnel.

2.7 States will have a well-trained regulatory workforce with average caseloads between 50 and 75 per staff person⁵ and a system capable of providing technical assistance.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

The average caseload from July 1, 2003, through June 30, 2004, was 92, which exceeds the guidelines established by APHA and AAP.

2.8 States will ensure parental right of access to their child's early care and education facilities.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Section 402.305(11), Florida Statutes, states that "minimum standards shall provide for reasonable access to the child care facility by the custodial parent or guardian during the time the child is in care."

Goal 3: States will support development of quality early care and education programs for all children.

3.1 States will provide all early care and education providers with resources to help them improve the quality of care and education they deliver, such as technical assistance and training, accreditation support, grants to meet health and safety requirements and grants to support family child care home networks.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

State Initiatives:

The Florida T.E.A.C.H. (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps) Early Childhood Scholarship Program offers education scholarships to providers and teachers throughout the state. Early childhood educators can obtain an associate of science degree in early childhood education, a Child Development Associate (CDA) or Director Credential by attending classes at one of the fifty-two colleges, universities and vocational-technical schools throughout the state that partner with the T.E.A.C.H. program.

The Florida Partnership for School Readiness has also developed Birth to Three Learning and Developmental Standards and Three, Four, and Five year old Performance Standards. These Standards teach developmental milestones and guide you through a child's physical health, approaches to learning, social and emotional development, language and communication, cognitive development and general knowledge; and motor development. These books have been mass produced and distributed to all school readiness coalitions for their local community. The books are also a part of the Partnership's statewide Quality Initiative contract. Training is offered throughout the state to early childhood educators and the standards are also being used as textbooks in colleges for early childhood courses.

The Partnership has a statewide contract with the Florida Children's Forum wherein they perform a wide range of quality enhancement activities. They have conducted statewide and regional training events such as:

1) "Guiding our Course to Quality Infant and Toddler Care," October 13-14, 2003
2) "Beyond Centers & Circle Time: Scaffolding and Assessing the Play of Young Children" Train-the-Trainers Institutes, January – March 2004

3) "Guiding our Course to Quality Outcomes for Children: Screening, Assessment, & Curriculum," February 2004

4) "Discipline that Works; Building Bonds with our Most Challenging Children," November 2003 and May 2004

Local Coalition Initiatives:

Florida's local School Readiness Coalitions are mandated to utilize no less than 4% of funding toward activities to improve the quality of child care. Coalitions use those funds in a variety of ways to meet their local needs.

Coalitions use some of their quality dollars for different initiatives. One has hired a nurse to provide health screenings; review immunization records; and to train providers in best practices regarding health, nutrition, and safety. One has established a program called the Parent Place which is stocked with quality toys and books which families may earn certificates through involvement in their child's education redeemable for free books and toys at the Parent Place.

Many coalitions offer researched-based curriculum training, reduced or free curriculum materials, and technical assistance as needed for implementation. In addition, coalitions have established mobile resource vans or mobile lending libraries where toys, games and books are brought to the provider's location.

In some areas, coalitions offer financial and technical assistance to help providers become accredited.

3.2 States will have Child Care Resource and Referral networks to deliver quality early care and education enhancement support services to providers, such as outreach, training and technical assistance.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Parents receive information or "parent packets" on quality indicators such as licensure standards, staff-to-child ratios, health and safety standards and a checklist to use when they visit a site to help them make an informed decision about the child care provider they choose. Many agencies have public awareness campaigns or outreach plans for businesses, communities, and providers.

The Florida Children's Forum holds the statewide contract for maintaining the statewide Resource and Referral Network. Technical assistance is provided by the R&R Network staff through telephone consultations, e-mail, website, mail-outs, regional/statewide trainings and on-site visits.

3.3 States will implement a rating system to recognize providers for incremental levels of quality.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Every two years a market rate survey for provider reimbursement rates is conducted by county for the state of Florida. A survey was conducted and rates were released effective July 1, 2003. Rates are broken down by the age of the child and then by the

type of provider, i.e. licensed or exempt centers, licensed homes, registered homes, or informal providers.

Gold seal providers may be paid up to twenty percent more than the highest rate for the type of provider they are. The purpose of the Gold Seal program is to acknowledge child care facilities that are accredited by nationally recognized associations and whose standards reflect quality in the level of care and supervision provided to children. Currently, Florida recognizes 11 accrediting agencies as Gold Seal quality. These can be found at <http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/childcare/goldseal.shtml>

3.4 States will implement tax and other incentives to develop and expand early care and education programs that demonstrate a higher level of quality.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Many local communities and/or local coalitions have solicited funding from a variety of sources, including institutions and individuals. A number of cities, usually with the help of child advocacy groups, have passed ad valorem taxes to increase funding for early childhood programs.

3.5 States will use a formal mechanism to seek parental input in program evaluations and will use that information in making policy decisions related to early care and education programs.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Parents are appointed and participate in several of our statewide initiatives.

Parents currently serve on Project STEPS a statewide initiative which has developed a community wide transition system to help families move from one environment to another for programs and services.

Parents have been involved with the development of the Birth to Three Learning and Developmental Standards and the Three, Four, and Five year old Performance Standards, as well as the development of the Simplified Point of Entry on-line application to ensure it was easy to fill out and understand.

Local CCR&R agencies conduct parent surveys to ensure that quality service is provided to families and use this feedback to effect change if needed.

3.6 States will identify and support the use of effective research based curricula.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Local Level:

Florida Statute 411.01(5)(c)2a states that School Readiness Coalitions must implement a developmentally appropriate curriculum for programs in their community. Many coalitions have adopted a variety of curricula from which providers can choose. The top two curricula used in the early childhood classrooms throughout the state are Creative Curriculum and High Scope. Many coalitions use quality dollars to purchase researched-based curriculum, provide free training to their providers, as well as follow-up technical assistance during and after implementation in their classrooms. Others offer mini-grants to assist the provider with their purchase of curriculum and enhancement materials. The Florida T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Scholarship Program offers higher education scholarships to providers and teachers throughout the state. Some coalitions also offer train the trainer classes wherein the trainees are trained at no cost, with the agreement they will train others.

State Level:

The Partnership, through a contract with the Florida Children's Forum held state wide training -- "Beyond Centers and Circle Time: Scaffolding and Assessing the Play of Young Children" Train-the-Trainers Institutes, January – March 2004, and "Guiding our Course to Quality Outcomes for Children: Screening, Assessment, & Curriculum," February 2004.

Goal 4: Staff in early care and education settings will be appropriately credentialed and adequately compensated.

4.1 States will maintain a professional development system that ensures, at a minimum, providers in early care and education settings meet standards set forth by APHA/AAP, NAEYC or NAFCC.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Florida Statutes 411.01 (5)(c)1c provides for the provision of coordinated staff development and teaching opportunities. Many of the local coalitions coordinate with area Community Colleges in developing a training program which provides college credit and/or CEU's that will enable participants to work towards AS, AA, Bachelors or Masters degrees. Most Community Colleges offer CDA training with a required 40 hours of coursework and a competency test upon completion. Some local School Readiness Coalitions offer substitute teacher reimbursement to providers who send staff to training or stipend awards to staff who attend training on their own time, as well as incentives for completing credential or AA/AS degree.

The Florida T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Scholarship Program offers higher education scholarships to providers and teachers throughout the state.

Florida is also a HeadsUp! ReadingSM State. This initiative is a 44 hour course on researched-based early literacy delivered live using satellite television. This program delivers the highest quality professional development to early educators and child

care providers who teach and care for children birth through five. The program utilizes Florida's existing Telestar and PAEC satellite television training systems to add to Florida's 43 existing HeadsUp! ReadingSM satellite locations. Telestar reaches all 67 school districts, 11 state universities, 28 community colleges and 4 research schools.

4.2 States will require approved ongoing annual professional development for staff, appropriate to their education levels and job requirements, as specified in APHA/AAP. States will provide and implement a professional development system that verifies trainers, approves training and tracks the training of participants.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Many of the local coalitions coordinate with area Community Colleges in developing a training program which provides college credit and/or CEU's that will enable participants to work towards AS, AA, Bachelors or Masters degrees. Some local School Readiness Coalitions offer substitute teacher reimbursement to providers who send staff to training or stipend awards to staff who attend training on their own time as well as incentive for completing credential or AA/AS degree.

4.3 The federal government and states will provide universally available, comprehensive scholarships to early care and education providers who are pursuing a CDA or two- or four-year degree in child development, early childhood education, early childhood special education or child care administration. Scholarships will address the costs of tuition, fees and books and will support components such as travel costs, paid release time and child care.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

The Florida T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Scholarship Program offers higher education scholarships to providers and teachers throughout the state. Early childhood educators can obtain an associate of science degree in early childhood education, a Child Development Associate (CDA) or Director Credential by attending classes at one of eighty-seven colleges, universities and vocational-technical schools throughout the state that partner with the T.E.A.C.H. program. The scholarships have four integral components: scholarship includes tuition, books, travel and release time; education includes coursework towards Associate of Science, Child Development Associate or Director Credential; compensation includes increased wages for the participant; and commitment includes an agreement to continue working in their center for a set amount of time. The program is based on a partnership model that involves the sharing of expenses by the teacher, the sponsoring child care center, and the T.E.A.C.H. program. Florida has issued over 10,000 scholarships since July of 1998.

Local quality initiative dollars also support the T.E.A.C.H. program by offering local mini-grants as provider incentives to obtain higher education or certification.

Child Care WAGE\$® Florida Project was designed to improve quality by reducing turnover and encouraging the continued education of early childhood teachers. Designed to provide young children with more stable relationships with their teachers, the program rewards teachers with salary supplements.

- 4.4 States will work with educational institutions to ensure that coursework is accessible in order to meet the early care and education workforce training needs, such as courses offered at night, on weekends, in accelerated formats, on-line and in various languages. Courses will address the varying educational levels of the workforce.**

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Florida offers Early Childhood Education at the high school, technical centers, community colleges and university levels. Florida is a local control state, therefore the schools decided at the local level when the courses will be offered based upon the needs of the community. Various on line programs exist. In Miami-Dade County courses are offered in Spanish. The Department of Children and Families offers their required training at various times including weekends. Community colleges work with Coalitions and School Districts to provide on-site classes at times that early childhood teachers are able to attend.

Florida HeadsUp! ReadingSM initiative is delivered live using satellite television. This program reaches centers directly or a nearby location via the training Network. The training also uses an interactive website to reinforce the learning.

- 4.5 The federal government and states will provide financial incentives that reward completion of approved levels of professional development.**

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Florida's T.E.A.C.H. program has a compensation component wherein scholarship recipients can choose a one time financial bonus or a percentage increase to their salary depending upon the educational level they choose.

Through local quality dollars, school readiness coalitions offer scholarships for attendance and completion of degree programs.

- 4.6 The federal government and states will provide college loan forgiveness programs for persons earning an approved degree who work for a specified period of time in early care and education programs.**

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

The state of Florida does not currently have this available in early care and education programs.

- 4.7 States will work toward a system whereby staff with approved degrees or credentials will receive employment benefits and compensation at comparable levels to the state's public education system.**

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

The state of Florida does not currently have this available in early care and education programs.

- 4.8 States will ensure meaningful agreements and processes to enable the transfer of credits between and among approved two- and four-year degree programs.**

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Florida currently has local agreements between community colleges and universities for articulation, i.e., Polk Community College and the University of South Florida. It is hopeful that the passage of the final Universal Pre-K Bill will enhance this to a broader area in the state bringing articulation between the CDA, AA, and BA degree programs.

Goal 5: Families will have the information to make well-informed decisions about the quality of their child's care and education and to be actively involved in their child's care and education.

- 5.1 States will support Child Care Resource and Referral networks that are easily accessible to parents and that provide information on child development, quality indicators, provider choices, vacancies and linkages to additional information.**

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Florida Statutes 411.01 (5)(d)3g provides for the provision of systems support services, including a central agency, child care resource and referral, eligibility determinations, training of providers, and parent support and involvement. Resource and Referral Agencies provide parents with a full range of child care options. Parents receive information or "parent packets" on quality indicators such as licensure standards, staff-child ratios, health and safety standards and a checklist to use when they visit a site to help them make an informed decision about the child care provider they choose. Many agencies have public awareness campaigns or outreach plans for businesses, communities, and providers.

Florida's School Readiness Act provides for a seamless delivery system for services. Through screening and assessment, children are identified who are potentially at-risk and referred for additional services as needed.

- 5.2 States will support early care and education providers in promoting parental involvement and in seeking parental input into the development and improvement of their programs.**

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Florida Statutes 411.01(5)(d)3g provides for parental involvement and skill-building/education opportunities including family literacy activities. Local coalitions have established a variety of ways to promote parental involvement in their child's early education and care. Many provide newsletters, brochures, community events, training, and volunteer opportunities to keep the parents informed and educated. Many coalitions support home visitation programs that focus on intensive parent education, behavior modeling, and assistance in attaining self-sufficiency. All of these initiatives increase the quality of the parent/child interaction.

On the state level, Florida has published "The Best We Can Be, Parents and Children Growing Together" a book that was distributed statewide in April, 2004. The book is designed to provide support for parents in life's most rewarding and challenging job. This reader-friendly resource helps parents form strong, loving relationships with their children as well as promote their early learning and prepare them for success in school and in life. The sections are coordinated with well-child checkups and provide age-appropriate advice for enriching the time spent with children to facilitate their healthy growth and development in all domains, with an emphasis on language and literacy as well as on social/emotional development. In addition, it includes strategies for dealing with the challenges that can come with these emerging skills.

Florida First Start Program was created for children from birth to three years of age who have a disability or are at risk of future school failure and their families. The program is a home-school partnership designed to give children at risk of future school failure the best possible start in life and to support parents in their roles as their children's first teachers. Emphasis is on enabling families to enhance their children's intellectual, physical, language, and social development by involving parents in their children's education during the critical first three years of life. Through early parent education and support services, the program lays the foundation for later learning and future school success, while fostering effective parent/school relationships.

Goal 6: Quality early care and education programs will be financially accessible to all children.

6.1 *Federal and state governments will adjust the child care tax credit expense limits to accurately reflect the cost of quality care.*

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Florida does not have state income tax.

6.2 *States with income taxes will establish refundable child and dependent care tax credits.*

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Florida does not have state income tax.

6.3 State and federal child and dependent care tax credit income-eligibility and expense limits will be indexed for inflation.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Florida does not have state income tax.

6.4 Federal, state, local and private funds will be sufficient to meet 100% of the need for direct early care and education financial aid, based on initial eligibility levels at 85% of the state median income. Federal law will allow and states will implement redetermination policies that allow families to retain early care and education financial aid until they reach 100% of state median income.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Florida Statutes 411.01(6)(a)2 provides that children of working families whose family income does not exceed 150 percent of the federal poverty level is eligible for school readiness services. The Partnership, through adoption of rules (60BB-4.203, Florida Administrative Code), establishes that eligibility may only continue provided the family's income is at or below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level.

6.5 Federal and state governments should develop policies and systems to assure families receiving financial aid pay no more than 10% of their gross income for early care and education.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

In May 2004, the Florida Partnership for School Readiness Board adopted a rule, 60BB-4.400, Florida Administrative Code; however it is still awaiting promulgation. 60BB-4.400(3) states "a coalition's sliding fee scale must be set at a level that provides low-income families equal access to the care available to families whose income is high enough not to qualify for financial assistance for school readiness services. To that end, the co-payment for the family of an "economically disadvantaged child", as defined by s. 411.01(6), Florida Statutes, should not exceed 10 percent of the family's income, regardless of the number of children in care. If the coalition's proposed sliding fee scale does exceed 10 percent of the family income, the coalition must provide justification of how the sliding fee scale meets the federal requirement that the co-payment be affordable, prior to approval of the proposed sliding fee scale by the Partnership board."

6.6 States will set payment rates at no less than the 75th percentile based on a market rate survey conducted every two years for each level and type of care. Annual inflation adjustments to payment rates will be made between market surveys.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

A statewide market rate survey by county was taken in March 2003 to establish the maximum rate schedule calculated at the 75th percentile for all types of providers. Local school readiness coalitions use this survey to establish the maximum rate to be

paid to providers depending upon whether they are a center (licensed or exempt), a licensed home, or a registered home provider.

6.7 States will implement payments to providers commensurate with the quality-rating level achieved by the early care and education programs.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

The state of Florida does not have a quality-rating level for reimbursement. However, Gold Seal accredited providers may be paid up to 20% above the market rate for age and type of care.

6.8 States will examine the financing of quality early care and education in their state and work toward providing payment rates that recognize the cost commensurate with the standards set forth in this action plan.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

A statewide market rate survey by county was taken in March 2003 to establish the maximum rate schedule calculated at the 75th percentile for all types of providers.

6.9 States will design and aggressively implement outreach initiatives to provide families with easy-to-understand early care and education financial aid information and application assistance.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

There are several ways parents can access early care and education information and services.

In October 2003, Florida went live with their Simplified Point of Entry which is an online application for parents to apply for School Readiness programs. Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) serves as the hub of information for all school readiness programs promoting early care and education as well as services for school age children. Parents can fill out this easy to understand step by step application at their local CCR&R agency, their local Workforce One Stop Center, their local library, or from any location with internet access. The Partnership took measures to ensure that the language was at or below a 4th grade reading level.

At any time during the application process, a parent can e-mail or speak to one of our Resource and Referral Specialists which are directly linked to all of the local CCR&R agencies in Florida. The network office and all local CCR&R agencies utilize the Florida Relay TTD system to allow full access to services for person with hearing impairments.

Goal 7: States will ensure that accountability is built into all systems, programs and activities undertaken to achieve the goals of this action plan.

7.1 States will convene appropriate stakeholders to develop written strategic plans for improving the quality of early care and education programs in the state. These plans will include key goals, quantifiable measures of progress and program outcomes for all quality enhancement activities.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Through the efforts of the Partnership for School Readiness state board, the State Board of Education, and the Universal Pre-K Education Advisory Council, Florida has seen a number of efforts to improve the quality of early care at the state level. The Partnership board has developed and published performance standards for birth to five-year-old children that correlate with the K-12 Florida Sunshine Standards and are cross-referenced with Head Start standards. These performance standards deliver goals that teachers and parents should look for in a number of developmental domains.

The Universal Pre-K Advisory Council also worked diligently over a few months and made some serious recommendations for the universal, voluntary Pre-K program that is scheduled to begin in Aug. 2005. These recommendations included lower teacher-to-child ratios, highly qualified staff, among other things. The board also recommended that the state's performance measure — the School Readiness Uniform Screening System (SRUSS) — be evaluated for literacy components. As a result of their work, and the Governor visiting several schools and teachers, a literacy component has been added to the SRUSS. DIBLES, or the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, was added to the SRUSS to measure early literacy skills in children at the kindergarten level. This tool is quick and easy. It measures a child's "letter naming fluency" and "initial sounds fluency" through short 1-minute assessments. After the results are tabulated, researchers and statisticians can evaluate how well children in the school readiness program performed compared to their peers.

In addition to the efforts at the state level to increase the quality of early care, local school readiness coalitions are responsible for quality initiatives in their own communities. Pre- and post-tests are determined at the local level and delivered to children in the school readiness program. Developmentally appropriate curricula is also encouraged through mini-grants and training.

7.2 States will collect and analyze data and produce written annual reports on progress toward identified goals. Reports will be made readily available to the public.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

The Partnership is required by law to complete an annual report. These reports summarize activities, expenditures, and the number of children served.

As mentioned in the previous question, the state also tabulates the SRUSS results. These scores are broken down by county level so local coalitions can see the performance level of the children they served.

In addition, local coalitions submit local plans with identifiable goals to the Partnership for School Readiness. These plans are reviewed, and approved or denied. In return, coalitions are monitored annually and expected to meet the goals included in their plan.

7.3 States will use data and annual reports to make continuous policy improvements and evaluate quality enhancement activities.

Action taken between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004

Florida's early learning programs are continuing to change and improve. Coalitions are better prepared now than ever before to improve the quality of care at the local level. In addition, the statewide push to have a quality universal Pre-K program is stirring discussion and moving the entire school readiness program towards improvement. We have already seen the fruits of some of these discussions. For instance, the fall of 2004 was the first year DIBELS was used in every kindergarten classroom in Florida. Previously, it had only been used at schools receiving Reading First grants. While the fall assessment is the only part of DIBELS used for the SRUSS, DIBELS also has a winter and spring component that helps teachers track a child's development in early literacy skills. Research supports that early skills of letter naming and sound segmentation lead to later, higher levels of fluencies in reading comprehension. In Florida, more children will be monitored to make sure they are learning these essential early literacy skills as a result of our continuous efforts for improvement.

¹ NAEYC – National Association for the Education of Young Children

² NAFCC – National Association of Family Child Care

³ APHA – American Public Health Association

⁴ AAP – American Academy of Pediatrics

⁵ American Public Health Association & American Academy of Pediatrics. 2002. *Caring for our children: National health and safety performance –Guidelines for out-of-home child care programs*. Washington, DC: American Public Health Association.