



Southern Regional Initiative on Child Care: Action Plan to Improve Access to Child Care Assistance for Low-Income Families in the South

**Survey Results on the Status of Implementation Efforts
September 2002**

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Goal 1 - Federal, State, Local and Private Funds Should Be Sufficient to Meet 100% of Need for Direct Child Care Assistance, Based on Initial Eligibility Levels at 85% of the State Median Income. Redetermination Levels Should Allow Families to Retain Child Care Assistance Until They Reach 100% of State Median Income.

(Action Step 1.1) - Educate federal and state policymakers on the need for action.

2002 Response:

The State Board of Education charged the Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education, the administering agency for the ABC program, to study and make recommendations regarding the cost, quality and rate structure for the current program. A task force comprised of early childhood professionals, public school personnel, Legislators and parents spent eight months reviewing data and program issues and made recommendations to the State Board of Education in February 2002.

The Board approved a new ABC Core Quality Model for all pre-K programs that sets a reimbursement rate of \$4, 995.85 per child for the center based model and \$1648.05 per family for HIPPY and PAT.

There are two groups commissioned through legislation in Arkansas (Blue Ribbon Commission and the State Board Advisory Committee) studying the public education system as a result of the ruling by Judge Collins Kilgore in the Lakeview School District, No. 25 of Phillips County, et al vs. Mike Huckabee, Governor of the State of Arkansas, et al. that stated the school funding system now in place in the State of Arkansas is inequitable and inadequate under the Constitution. Judge Kilgore, in his opinion, stated that in order to provide our children with an adequate education as required by the Constitution the State must provide programs for those children of pre-school age that will allow them to compete academically with their peers. He went on to say that the urgency of this need equals that of the deficiency in teacher salaries.

The Next Step Plan by Governor Huckabee includes recommendations for early care and education. He wants to assure access to Head Start, ABC or other education-based quality pre-school programs.

Also, both Legislative groups studying the issues have made recommendations that a program of early childhood education shall be available for all four-year old children in Arkansas.

Now the House and Senate Education Committees will begin the work of analyzing the recommendations and deciding the funding priorities.

2001 Response:

Governor supported low -income working families by placing \$1 million in each year of the biennium for direct services.

A TANF transfer of \$12 million will occur by October 1, 2001.

Act 1841- The Child Care for Working Families Act. This places a 3% tax on beer to be used for two areas. The state pre-k (ABC) programs will receive 80% of the revenues. Direct services for low-income working families will receive 20% of the revenues. The estimated revenue is \$6.5 million in SFY 2002 and \$9.7 million SFY 2003.

Act 1271 established the Early Care Foundation, which will accept and match contributions from private business and individuals for child care. The Department of Human Services will provide \$1 million in match funds over the next two years to initiate this project.

We are currently working with Joint House and Senate Education Committees in an interim study. The first addressed early care and education policies and general questions. This study will address early care and education funding. We have provided our Federal Congressional Leaders with data and recommendations.

(Action Step 1.2) - Educate the business community on the need for leadership in achieving state, federal and community resources to meet 100% of need.

2002 Response:

One of the recommendations of *The Arkansas Corporate Champions for Children Task Force* was to establish the Governor's Family-Friendly Employer Award, which will recognize employers who have established policies and practices that address the growing concerns of employees trying to balance work and family life. In addition, the campaign will distribute business-oriented child care resource guides and information on programs and policies considered best practices to use as models for replication. The recommendations for implementation have been completed and we are in the process of establishing the Advisory Committee to oversee the process of selection. The award ceremony is scheduled for March 2003.

There are also business leaders that have served on both groups studying the public education system in this state.

2001 Response:

Act 1271 established the Early Care Foundation, which will accept and match contributions from private business and individuals for child care. The Department of Human Services will provide \$1 million in match funds over the next two years to initiate this project.

The Division in conjunction with the Governor's office will develop an initiative with faith based community leaders to encourage participation in child care in their local communities. The first organizational meeting in October 4, 2001.

The Arkansas Corporate Champions for Children Task Force made recommendations to the Governor before the 2001 Legislative session. As a result ACT 1271 was passed, that established the Foundation for Early Care and Education. This foundation will accept and match contributions from private business and individuals for child care. Foundation resources will be used to enhance quality, affordability, and availability of child care and early education for children in the state.

(Action Step 1.3) - Increase federal funding for the Child Care and Development Fund to fulfill current policy allowing federal matching funds for child care assistance up to 85% of the state median income.

2002 Response:

Because of the Governor's additional \$1 million in SGR, TANF transfer and beer tax revenues we have drastically reduced our waiting list from 4,631 to 894 families as of August 2002. We are still serving families at 60% of the state median income.

2001 Response:

Although we have received an increase in Federal funding for the CCDF Block grant it does not allow us to raise our eligibility level to 85% of the state median income. We are currently serving families at, or below 60% of the state median income with a waiting list of 4,631 families.

(Action Step 1.4) - Increase state funding to provide child care subsidies to all eligible families who seek child care assistance.

2002 Response:

Because of the Governor's additional \$1million in SGR, TANF transfer and beer tax revenues we have drastically reduced our waiting list from 4,631 to 894 families as of August 2002. We are working to eliminate the waiting list for services.

2001 Response:

State funding was increased this year through two new sources. The Governor supported a \$1 million increase in funding in 2002-2003 to address child care accessibility for low-income working families. Secondly, Act 1841, The Child Care for Working Families Act, was passed that placed a 3 percent retail excise tax on beer. Revenues from this tax are dedicated to child care and early childhood education. The tax is expected to generate \$6.6 million during FY 2002 and \$9.7 million in FY 2003.

(Action Step 1.5) - Mobilize federal, state and community resources in support of families who need child care assistance.

2002 Response:

All forces are mobilized in this state around early care and education due to the tremendous impact of the Lakeview lawsuit. "Speak Up Arkansas" Forums held in all 75 counties in Arkansas enabled communities to give their input regarding the recommendations by the Blue Ribbon Commission. Early care and education was a top priority in most counties across the state.

2001 Response:

Kids Count Coalition, sponsored by Arkansas Advocates, successfully energized and empowered providers and parents during the last session and they were a large reason that numerous child care bills were passed. Kids Count provided training at the local level on “how to tell the story” and set up an information network to keep everyone on the same page. This is a strong group that will move forward in the 2003 session.

Goal 2: States and Communities Should Broaden Their Child Care Eligibility and Subsidy Policies to Meet the Economic, Work and Education Needs of Families

(Action Step 2.1) - Establish co-payments not to exceed 10% of gross family income.

2002 Response:

Only a small percentage of families (6-7%) in Arkansas pay a co-payment.

2001 Response:

Only 6-7 % of the families pay a co-payment in Arkansas.

(Action Step 2.2) - Provide child care assistance to students who qualify under the income guidelines.

2002 Response:

Because of the Governor’s additional \$1 million in SGR, TANF transfer and beer tax revenues we have drastically reduced our waiting list from 4,631 to 894 families as of August 2002. Students are receiving services.

2001 Response:

All students (vocational, 2 yr., 4 yr., etc.) qualify in this category with High School students given top priority.

Changes were made in the approved State Plan, which reduce the number of required college hours from 15 per semester to 12.

As TANF transfer money becomes available these families will receive services.

(Action Step 2.3) - Explore broad use of income exemptions to address affordability of child care.

2002 Response:

TANF cash assistance is not counted as income. The definition of “work” has been reduced from 35 hours to 32 hours per week.

2001 Response:

Each adult household member who is employed at least 35 hours per week will have a \$100.00 work related deduction made from their gross income to account for withholding and other mandatory work-related expenses.

A Casehead receiving SSI is disregarded.

Other miscellaneous income such as bonuses, income tax returns, insurance settlements, etc. are disregarded.

(Action Step 2.4) - Eliminate asset testing (e.g. automobile or savings account) from criteria for child care assistance.

2002 Response:

We have eliminated the asset test.

2001 Response:

We have eliminated the asset test.

(Action Step 2.5) - Index income eligibility levels for inflation.

2002 Response:

The sliding fee scale was adjusted to reflect the current level of 60% of the state median income.

2001 Response:

The sliding fee scale was adjusted to reflect the current level of 60% of the state median income.

Goal 3: Outreach Initiatives Should Be Designed and Aggressively Implemented to Assure That Families Have Accessible and Easy-To-Understand Information on Child Care Assistance and Are Provided Assistance in Applying.

(Action Step 3.1) - Provide information on child care subsidies through multiple sources, venues and the media.

2002 Response:

We have utilized many outreach avenues to reach eligible families. Television commercials have run on the importance of quality and literacy for young children.

Easy to understand brochures have been made available in communities, large group sessions have been held to explain the eligibility system. Public service announcements have been completed in some counties. Now that money is available for low income working families, we are receiving between 700-800 new

applications on a monthly basis.

2001 Response:

Applications placed on-line now for use by parents.

(Action Step 3.2) - Ensure that information is accurate, family friendly, employer friendly, culturally sensitive and provided in multiple languages, as appropriate.

2002 Response:

Our *Nuestra Familia* project designed to focus on cultural differences and how to work with children in the classroom has been piloted and is now being implemented in communities across the state. Communities with high concentrations of non-English speaking families will be empowered to establish support personnel to serve as resources in the community. We are also incorporating an evaluation component of this model involving parents.

2001 Response:

On September 18-20, 2001 our first ESL Academy for Pre-school teachers will be held in conjunction with the State Department of Education. The participants from local communities will be discussing cultural sensitivity and how to engage parents in the local community. Also, utilizing technology to “get the word out” about services we offer will be a strong component of the training.

(Action Step 3.3) - Present information in a manner that would remove the stigma associated with receiving subsidies.

2002 Response:

Family Connection Kits are available for child care programs linking child care activities to family activities. This kit addresses the early childhood framework/early learning guidelines. Materials are available to all parents in our state.

2001 Response:

We have developed child care information pamphlets for parents regarding all the services offered through the Division. Through the resource and referral agencies information is also given out in a manner that removes the stigma. We have also just completed a Customer Satisfaction survey with parents and providers that strongly supports the fact that parents are treated with respect when dealing with DHS and that they are getting their needs met.

(Action Step 3.4) - Provide literature and assistance to help parents make informed provider choices.

2002 Response:

The Division issued a “Parent’s Guide to Child Care” which is distributed by

eligibility specialists throughout the state. The guide gives basic information on types of care available, subsidy opportunities, and what to look for in high quality care settings.

2001 Response:

See above answer

(Action Step 3.5) - Coordinate ongoing and strategic outreach activities among common organizations and providers.

2002 Response:

Training is provided regarding Division services at training conferences and Professional organizational meetings across the state. Town meetings will be held across the state to discuss eligibility issues and the upcoming proposed legislative agenda. Coordination within the Division has increased participation in both the child care assistance program and the USDA Food Program.

2001 Response:

Within the division we have developed a new policy that states that when any application from a new provider comes in that information will be forwarded to the unit administrators and someone will be designated to call the providers and let them know what services are available through the division.

I am also attending all of the Governor's Forums across the state where issues surrounding child care usually come up. I will be able to readily give the participants contact information.

We are also participating in the Arkansas Department of Economic Development forums across the state. The message that child care is a workforce issue is the top priority.

(Action Step 3.6) - Offer cross-training and information to providers, community organizations, faith organizations, and state agencies to inform them about child care assistance programs and how to assist families in filing applications.

2002 Response:

Training is offered to major organizations and communities (including for-profit, non-profit and faith-based) across the state regarding information and assistance for parents related to the subsidy program. Division staff served on a panel at the Community Action Agencies Conference to discuss all services provided by our Division. The Director of the Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education meets monthly with the Head Start Directors and is a member of the state-wide Faith Based Initiative sponsored by the Governor's office.

2001 Response:

See answers 3.5 and 1.2.

Goal 4: The Child Care Application and Redetermination Processes Should Be Uncomplicated and Family Friendly.

(Action Step 4.1) - Simplify applications for child care assistance.

2002 Response:

We are currently examining application policies. The provider contract will be reviewed this year and input will be solicited from parents and providers.

2001 Response:

We are examining application policies currently.

(Action Step 4.2) - Allow filing by mail, phone, fax or internet.

2002 Response:

Applications can be made through all the above methods.

2001 Response:

Applications can be made through all above methods.

(Action Step 4.3) - Minimize requests for documentation at initial application and utilize documents already on file.

2002 Response:

We are currently examining application policies.

2001 Response:

We are examining application policies currently.

(Action Step 4.4) - Provide applications at multiple sites.

2002 Response:

Applications are provided at multiple sites including DHS offices, all resource and referral locations, county offices, and on-line.

2001 Response:

Applications are provided at multiple sites including DHS offices, all resource and referral locations and on-line.

(Action Step 4.5) - Offer non-conventional hours of operation for eligibility offices and provide toll-free phone lines to include evening and weekend hours.

2002 Response:

Some of our workers have arranged times outside the normal operating hours if necessary, but this is not required by policy.

2001 Response:

Until we begin to receive additional funding from our Legislative efforts this will not be necessary.

(Action Step 4.6) - Explore presumptive eligibility or otherwise provide immediate eligibility contingent upon final approval.

2002 Response:

We are currently examining application policies.

2001 Response:

We are examining application policies currently.

(Action Step 4.7) - Eliminate requirements for a face-to-face interview both for initial application and for redetermination.

2002 Response:

Face- to- face interviews are held for the initial determination but not required for redetermination.

2001 Response:

We are examining application policies currently.

(Action Step 4.8) - Provide consultation on making appropriate choices when excessive requests for provider changes are filed.

2002 Response:

This is completed by the caseworker if necessary.

2001 Response:

This is currently completed by the caseworker if necessary.

(Action Step 4.9) - Establish a 12-month redetermination period where there are no changes in income or job status.

2002 Response:

We are currently examining application and redetermination policies. The provider contract will be reviewed this year and input from parents and providers will be solicited.

2001 Response:

We are examining application and redetermination policies currently.

(Action Step 4.10) - Continue eligibility for full subsidy for 12 weeks if family loses employment but can document that a job search is underway.

2002 Response:

Families that lose employment can continue eligibility for three weeks if they document that a job search is underway.

2001 Response:

We are examining these policies currently.

Goal 5: Establish a Coordinated, Seamless Eligibility System So That Funding Sources Are Invisible to Families and Support Continuity of Child Care.

(Action Step 5.1) - Eliminate the need for families to reapply when eligibility categories change by automatically searching to exhaust all eligibility categories before closing cases.

2002 Response:

Category changes are made without closure if TEA parents are moving into Transitional care. The same procedure is utilized when parents move into Low-income Working care. Both systems are open at this time due to increased revenues.

2001 Response:

Category changes are made without closure if TEA parents are moving into transitional care.

(Action Step 5.2) - Explore the potential for policy and procedural changes to achieve linkages with or combined applications for child care assistance, Head Start, Pre-K and Title I.

2002 Response:

We have adjusted our public pre- K income eligibility standards to match those of

the CCDF Block grant. This increased the number of children eligible under the income category for the public pre-K program.

2001 Response:

We are still working on this.

(Action Step 5.3) - Continue eligibility in programs with multiple funding sources to assure continuity of care in the event that eligibility has expired or terminated in one program.

2002 Response:

We have strong linkages with Head Start and Department of Education and effectively utilize multiple funding streams to create options for early care and education services for children.

2001 Response:

We are still working on this.

(Action Step 5.4) - Work collaboratively with all public and private programs and funding sources to assure that children receive stable and consistent early child care services.

2002 Response:

We have strong linkages with Head Start and Department of Education and effectively utilize multiple funding streams to create options for early care and education services for children.

2001 Response:

We are still working on this.

Goal 6: Establish Customer Service Outcome Goals and Set Standards to Ensure that All Families are Treated With Dignity and Respect and Are Served in an Efficient Manner.

(Action Step 6.1)- Provide professional and well-trained eligibility staff who are culturally and linguistically sensitive.

2002 Response:

Plans are being made to allow staff participation in our *Nuestra Familia* training. This project focuses on cultural differences and is now being implemented across the state.

2001 Response:

Efforts have been made to provide professional and well-trained staff. According to the recent Customer Satisfaction Survey parents and providers were pleased.

(Action Step 6.2) - Facilitate quick eligibility determination through reasonable caseloads and/or administrative structure.

2002 Response:

We have received approval for seven additional eligibility caseworkers and one supervisor in order to lower the caseloads.

2001 Response:

Our caseloads have been at the same level since September of 1999 due to limited funding. This is not an issue for us.

(Action Step 6.3) - Conduct periodic, independent and thorough consumer satisfaction assessments, assuring the confidentiality of information collected.

2002 Response:

We have plans to conduct another Customer Satisfaction Survey in 2003.

2001 Response:

See response 3.3 for Customer Satisfaction Survey results.

(Action Step 6.4) - Provide adequate support for child care resource and referral services.

2002 Response:

The state currently supports four local child care resource and referral networks and offers state- wide services through the central office. A council of representatives from the resource and referral agencies meets quarterly to develop plans to expand and upgrade services.

2001 Response:

Grants have always been provided to support the child care resource and referral organizations.

Goal 7: Design the Subsidy System So That Rate Structures Assure That Families Receiving Child Care Assistance Have Access to All Types of Child Care and Disallow Charges Above Established Co-Payments.

(Action Step 7.1) - States should cap reimbursement rates at no less than the 75th percentile based on a market rate survey conducted every two years that accurately reflects the price of all types of care in communities across the state.

2002 Response:

Rates are capped at the 75th percentile based on a market rate survey conducted every two years.

2001 Response:

We raised reimbursement rates beginning July 1, 2001 to reflect the current market rate survey of rates at the 75th percentile. (\$2.6 million increase)

(Action Step 7.2) - Establish and evaluate reimbursement policies that encourage provider participation and are responsive to family needs.

2002 Response:

We will address reimbursement policies this year during review of the provider contract. Input will be solicited from providers and community leaders.

2001 Response:

State planning process allowed input from providers and community leaders regarding reimbursement policies. Also we made personal contacts with providers during the “market rate survey” period in order to get the price sheets that they were giving to parents.

(Action Step 7.3) - Prohibit providers from charging above the established co-payments.

2002 Response:

We do not allow additional charges unless approved by our agency.

2001 Response:

We do not allow additional charges.

Goal 8: Create Partnerships With Employers to Expand Child Care Assistance for Working Families.

(Action Step 8.1) - Educate employers about the bottom line benefits associated with public and private child care assistance.

2002 Response:

One of the recommendations of *The Arkansas Corporate Champions for Children Task Force* was to establish the Governor's Family-Friendly Employer Award, which will recognize employers who have established policies and practices that address the growing concerns of employees trying to balance work and family life. In addition, the campaign will distribute business-oriented child care resource guides and information on programs and policies considered best practices to use as models for replication. The recommendations for implementation have been completed and we are in the process of establishing the Advisory Committee to oversee the process of selection. The award ceremony is scheduled for March 2003.

There are also business leaders that have served on both groups studying the public education system in this state. They have looked at the issue of quality care for young children and made a recommendation to include that in the plan.

2001 Response:

See response 1.1 for public private initiative information.

(Action Step 8.2) - Enlist business leaders to champion the involvement of southern businesses and to serve as mentors to other businesses.

2002 Response:

We have asked two representatives to serve on the Southern Business Council initiated by the Southern Institute.

2001 Response:

See response 1.1 for business participation through public private initiative.

(Action Step 8.3) - Provide information to employers on all available tax benefits related to child care assistance, including deductions for donations to tax-exempt child care organizations, capital costs for constructing a child care center and establishing a pre-tax dependent care assistance plan.

2002 Response:

Business child care kits are available to all employers. The Arkansas Department of Economic Development conducted a survey of all businesses with less than 200 employees to ascertain the level of involvement in child care issues.

2001 Response:

We have developed a "child care kit" that is available to employers that explains all of above plus additional information.

(Action Step 8.4) - Facilitate collaborative initiatives that enable employers to share ideas as well as pool their resources to address child care needs.

2002 Response:

One of the recommendations of the *Arkansas Corporate Champions for Children Task Force* was to establish the Governor's Family –Friendly Employer Award, which will recognize employers who have established policies and practices that address the growing concerns of employees trying to balance work and family life. In addition, the campaign will distribute business-oriented child care resource guides and information on programs and policies considered best practices to use as models for replication. The recommendations for implementation have been completed and we are in the process of establishing the Advisory Committee to oversee the process of selection. The award ceremony is scheduled for March 2003.

2001 Response:

This is part of the Early Care Foundation Act as well as the Governor's Faith based initiative in conjunction with the Division.

(Action Step 8.5) - Provide matching funds or other tax or financial incentives for employers to invest in child care.

2002 Response:

The Child Care Apprenticeship projects supported by the Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education and funded by the Department of Labor provide a financial incentive for employer involvement in child care and training for early care staff.

2001 Response:

The Early Care Foundation provides for \$ 1million to be utilized for matching funds. See action step 1.1.

(Action Step 8.6) - Establish incentives for employers to create child care benefit programs for their employees or to contribute to child care purchasing pools in their state or community.

2002 Response:

Due to budget cuts the state matching dollars for the Early Care Foundation are not available at this time.

2001 Response:

Please see action step 1.1.

(Action Step 8.7) - Reduce the administrative burden on employers participating in any joint public/private child care assistance program.

2002 Response:

Due to budget cuts, the implementation of the Public-Private Initiative was delayed.

2001 Response:

Please see action step 1.1.

Goal 9: Provide Child Care Assistance to Working Families Through Federal and State Tax Laws.

(Action Step 9.1) - Make the federal child dependent care tax credit refundable.

2002 Response:

NA

2001 Response:

NA

(Action Step 9.2) - Establish refundable child and dependent care tax credits in states with income taxes.

2002 Response:

Arkansas has a refundable child care tax credit available to parents.

2001 Response:

Arkansas already does this.

(Action Step 9.3) - Raise federal and state child care tax credit expense limits to accurately reflect the price of quality care.

2002 Response:

The Interim Study on Child Care Financing has established a tax work group to address Federal and State Tax issues in preparation for the 2003 Legislative session.

Plans to introduce new legislation are being finalized.

2001 Response:

NA

(Action Step 9.4) - Index for inflation the state and federal child and dependent care tax credit income eligibility and expense limits.

2002 Response:

The Interim Study on Child Care Financing has established a tax work group to address Federal and State Tax issues in preparation for the 2003 Legislative session. Plans to introduce new legislation are being finalized.

2001 Response:

NA

(Action Step 9.5) - Ensure that child and dependent care tax credits are clearly identified and easy to claim by filers using either the short or long form.

2002 Response:

The Division has worked with Department of Finance Administration (DFA) to ensure that parents can file easily.

2001 Response:

NA

(Action Step 9.6) - Encourage the use of effective state tax strategies to provide financial support for child care.

2002 Response:

Currently we have a 3% excise tax on beer to support Early Care and Education in our state.

2001 Response:

We have tax strategies in place currently and will be examining others during the next year for possible Legislative action in 2003.

Goal 10: States Should Have Effective, Coordinated Systems to Guide Child Care and Early Childhood Policy Decisions and Direct Use of Resources.

(Action Step 10.1) - Facilitate greater coordination in eligibility policies across child care and early childhood education programs at state and local levels.

2002 Response:

We continue to work collaboratively in Arkansas to address early care and education issues. During the past year we have focused on the following projects:

Early Learning Literacy Training in Arkansas(pre-K ELLA) is implemented in 75 counties.

ABC Core Quality Component Model adopted by the State Board of Education in February, 2002 and implemented July 1, 2002.

School Readiness Initiative to develop school readiness indicators and the assessment process for incoming kindergarten children.

The Nuestra Familia Project provides training for pre-school teachers working with children and families who have English as a second language.

Program Accountability across all agencies working with early care and education programs in order to maximize the use of limited resources.

2001 Response:

We have several collaborative projects in Arkansas. I have listed just a few below:

- The Arkansas Early Literacy Learning Training Program for pre-school teachers.
- Arkansas Corporate Champions for Children, the public-private initiative.
- The English as a Second Language Early Learning Academy for Pre-school teachers.
- The state accreditation program.
- A comprehensive funding source database including all Arkansas Department of Education funding, the Head Start funding, and DHS early care and education funding.
- The Readiness Initiative which will include setting readiness benchmarks for entry to Kindergarten and developing an assessment tool to evaluate incoming students thirty days prior to entering kindergarten.
- Transition initiative.

(Action Step 10.2) - All southern states and the District of Columbia should participate in a collaborative effort to develop and collect common data elements across states.

2002 Response:

We participate in the data collection efforts of the Southern Institute on Children and Families.

2001 Response:

NA—Southern Institute data