

**TESTIMONY OF THE CHILD CARE ACTION CAMPAIGN**

**Submitted to the Committee on Labor and Human Resources  
for a hearing, "Are Our Children Ready to Learn?"**

**December 4, 1998**

My name is Faith Wohl and I am president of Child Care Action Campaign (CCAC), a national nonprofit advocacy organization based in New York City. Child Care Action Campaign works to strengthen families, improve education and advance the well-being of children with good quality, safe, affordable child care.

Thank you for holding this hearing on the important question of the readiness of our young children to learn once they enter school; thank you, as well, for inviting me to participate. We know, of course, that children learn from the day they are born, provided they are in an environment that supports and encourages their development. Children's preparedness for school depends on their physical health and well-being, their social and emotional development, language use and cognitive knowledge. Their readiness for all early learning, including elementary school, requires the combined efforts of families, communities and schools to provide high quality care, stimulation and good health throughout the first five years of life..

Kindergarten and first grade teachers are quick to point out that they know almost from the first school bell in September which children will make it and which won't. They know which children come from high quality pre-school programs and which don't. They know very soon which children are ready to learn and which are not.

I am not an educator by profession or experience. Instead, I first became aware of the link between good quality early childhood programs and first grade performance when I had the privilege of studying the French child care system nearly ten years ago. I was then a human resources director for the DuPont Company in Wilmington, Delaware, and I was invited to be on a 14-person team sent to France by the French American Foundation. We were to determine whether there were lessons from the French system that could provide practical ideas for the United States.

We learned many memorable things in France as we studied and experienced their superb child care and preschool programs. One that was outstanding, both in its impact on me and its

relevance to today's hearing, was the fact that national French data showed a positive correlation between number of years in preschool and the rates at which children from all socio-economic backgrounds pass a first grade reading exam, a good indicator of school success. These data confirmed the French belief that preschool is an effective counterbalance to other differences, such as region and background, because its aims are the same, and its programs similar for all children in the country.

As I have told colleagues and associates many times, I came back from France an angry woman, but also a determined one. I was angry because I had seen in my two weeks there a level of quality in early childhood programming that was available only in isolated instances here, but was virtually universal there. As I told a group of French and Americans at a gathering in Paris then, I had visited many child care centers in the U.S., and it was a rare one that passed what I called *The Emily Test*. This was a visceral grandmother's question, "would I leave Emily here?" Emily was then 10 months old, and the youngest of my grandchildren. But in two weeks in France, every early childhood setting I had seen passed that demanding test.

My determination focused on what action I could take on returning to the United States to improve the quality of child care and early education and thus, enhance the ability of our children to succeed in school. My first effort in this regard was to institute at DuPont a program we called "Flying Colors," which used corporate financial incentives to encourage child care programs, in communities where we employed large numbers of people, to pursue professional accreditation through the National Association for the Education of Young Children. This was a way to persuade child care providers to reach for standards of quality higher than state licensing requirements. And it was a way to communicate the message that as a company we believed in the importance of good quality care. When we started, Delaware had only one center in the whole state that was professionally accredited. Within a fairly short time, there were more than 40 accredited programs.

I left DuPont in 1993 to join the federal government here in Washington as Director of the Office of Workplace Initiatives at the General Services Administration. In that role, I would, for the next four years, oversee 100 child care centers for civilian employees in Federal buildings across the country. I was delighted to learn that GSA had already instituted in 1992 the

requirement that **all of** the centers under **its** oversight become accredited. **As director of that program** I continued to **drive** the pursuit of accreditation **as** one means to assure a common standard of **quality** across all **GSA** centers. When I left, **more than 75%** of **GSA's** centers had achieved accreditation.

At the **end of last** year, I joined the Child Care Action Campaign, to be a **full time, full fledged** advocate for quality child care. What strikes me forcefully now, **and** continues to **make** me angry, **is** that while we know **that** good quality child care **and** preschool education help children enter school **ready to learn**, we have not **taken the steps** to act on that knowledge.

**When Congress** passed the Goals 2000: Educate America Act in **March of 1994**, it declared that **"by the year 2000, all** children in America will **start** school ready to **learn."** However, it did **not** provide new funding or **new** programs to **assure we would meet this goal**. It **would be** as if **we** had declared our national intent to go to the **moon** and **back in a decade**, but had not created **NASA** or a **new space** center to **make** sure it happened. The **law** called for **access** for **all** children to **high** quality pre-school programs **as** one **means** to reach **the readiness target**, but **we find** ourselves now, at the **end** of 1998, very **far** from that goal in terms of both **access** and quality.

In fact, the landmark study Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes in 1995 (1) **found that the quality of care in** more than 80% of **child** care centers is "poor to mediocre." In **40%** of infant and toddler rooms caregivers did not follow basic health and **safety** practices. **Experts in the field** would confirm that the situation today, several **years** after the **study**, has not **changed**. To **compound** the problem, **while** some parents struggle to find appropriate **child care in their** communities, **those** who do find good quality care most often discover it **is** too expensive, and **settle** for care they can afford, often unlicensed and developmentally inappropriate.

**Unless we take steps to make** sure that good quality child care and early **education is** available to every family that **needs it**, that caregivers are paid appropriate compensation instead of poverty-level **wages**, and that fees are affordable to parents, **we** not only **won't** meet **the school readiness target** in the year 2000, we will never meet it. In fact, **it's** clear now that **we** have already missed the goal established in the law. But that failure has been met with **silence** and

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

apparent lack of concern, when we should be in a national uproar over the opportunities our children have been denied.

Our failure to meet the year 2000 goal also means that the gloomy predictions of the Hudson Institute's Workforce 2020, published last year, will come to pass. The report pointed out that while "millions of Americans with proficiency in math, science and the English language will join a global elite whose services will be in intense demand... other Americans with inadequate education and no technological expertise will face declining real wages or unemployment." In short, by failing to ready children now for their education in school, we condemn them to second class status in our society for the rest of their lives.

Our quality crisis in early education is actually a crisis of finding, and solving it will require a big investment. In my opinion, that will require a radical shift in our priorities and our focus. We will have to lift our sights beyond the apparent constraints of the present and acknowledge fully that our children are the future of this country, the only future we have. They are the future work force, our future parents, our future citizens and the ones who will provide the resources to keep Social Security healthy. We simply have to start thinking differently.

Study after study has confirmed the fact that high quality early childhood programming works. Child Care Action Campaign will shortly release its own study, Right From the Start, which identifies 70 notably successful partnerships among child care, Head Start and public schools in low income communities in 35 states. Success is defined in terms of child outcomes, including improved readiness for and performance in school. These programs prove that we can ready children for school, even in difficult settings

Recently we worked with the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation in Ypsilanti, Michigan to release its newest study (2), which showed that obtaining additional external funding to supplement fees paid by parents can produce high quality programs where teachers are paid above-average wages and are thus more likely to make long-term commitments that foster their bonds with the children.

A study in Rochester, New York (3) showed that by doubling the number of children in publicly-funded early childhood programs over a six year period, the city was able to reduce the

incidence of serious learning, speech and motor skills problems in incoming kindergarteners from 61% to 38%.

In another New York State study, Syracuse (4) found that four year olds who were behind their age group in skills and vocabulary were able to catch up, in most cases, after only a few months of pre-kindergarten programs. In less than five months, the proportion of children working at or above a four year old's age level increased from 21% to 81%.

In short, we in the United States already know what the French first taught me nearly 10 years ago. Quality early childhood programs result in readiness for school and better performance in school. The difference--and a critical one--is our inability or unwillingness to act on the knowledge we have. That's what has to change.

I'd like to close my comments by quoting the founder of our organization, Mrs. Elinor Guggenheimer, who said this in 1992: "I want to see an entirely new approach to education--? system that recognizes that children learn from the moment of birth, that education is a continuum in which the formal school system plays only one pan. I want to look at the human animal in a new and fresh way, with an understanding of what may be lost in any one year due to neglect, poor nutrition and lack of cognitive stimulation. How do we take the newborn infant and begin and continue the process of developing the adult who can survive and contribute to a technologically-oriented democratic society? How can we integrate toddler care, preschool care, out-of-school care and the formal educational system?"

Until we can answer Mrs. Guggenheimer's questions, the answer to the query posed by this hearing, "Are Our Children Ready to Learn?" unfortunately will be no...not all of them. The critical question now is what are we as a nation prepared to do to recommit ourselves to this goal and to the necessary actions that will assure that we get there. To do less, is to abandon too many of our children to a future none of us in this room would want for our own children and grandchildren.

End Notes

1. Helburn, Calkin, Howes, Bryant, Clifford, Cryer, Peisner-Feinberg, Kagan, et al, *Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers*, 1995
2. Schweinhart, Fowler Kinch, High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, *Program Recognition Project*, 1998
3. Rochester City School District, *The Impact of Early Childhood Education Programs in Rochester*, 1994
4. Syracuse City School District, *Developmental Testing Results of Four-Year Old Prekindergarten Children*, 1995

[Whereupon, at 11:40 am. ,the committee was adjourned.]

O

BEST COPY AVAILABLE