



POLICY MATTERS FOR SCHOOL READINESS

NATIONAL CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES; TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

MISSISSIPPI FINAL REPORT

March 2005

ABOUT THE POLICY MATTERS PROJECT

Introduction

Policy Matters is a national project that helps states identify the policies and procedures necessary to create an early learning system for young children and their families. Grounded in a combination of vision and reality, Policy Matters supports states as they convert their systemic visions into concrete policies. Writ large, it acknowledges the piecemeal realities of the American policy apparatus for young children while maintaining a comprehensive policy vision. It is, at its heart, about developing strategies that will lead to more comprehensive policy making over time.

Rationale

Based on research findings, policymakers throughout the nation are increasingly looking to the early years as a time of profound importance in the lives of young children, a time when appropriate intervention can make a significant improvement in the life chances of individual children and can reduce costly societal expenditures later in life. As a result, a plethora of policies and programs for young children and their families have been developed and implemented. Usually uncoordinated and unsystematic, individual programs have emerged with little regard for their place in an early childhood system. Often inconsistent and irregular, funding has added to the creation of a patchwork of services that breeds rampant confusion for parents, practitioners, and policymakers.

Process

Against this backdrop, the Policy Matters project is working with select states to accurately assess current policies and to create a strategy for developing policies that support an integrated, coherent early childhood system. Specifically, Policy Matters guides state leaders as they look across programs, agencies, sectors, and institutional boundaries to consider approximately 100 individual policy choices that, together, affect the degree to which the state offers families a coherent, quality, accessible, and affordable system of services to support their children's readiness for school. In the first Policy Matters phase, referred to as the policy audit phase, state leaders assess current policies and collectively contrast existing with desired policy levels. In the second phase of the project, the political context phase, each state's political context is examined for durable policy variables (e.g., power of the legislature, governorship), and an on-line survey is conducted to ascertain the current policy climate, potential policy champions, state-based strengths and resources, and promising policy strategies. In the third and final phase of the effort, the Policy Matters project assists states to use the information gleaned in phases one and two to discern "can-do" policy changes that could

be accomplished in the next one to three years. The selected policies are politically-feasible, and represent a step toward the development of a coherent, coordinated, and comprehensive early care and education system.

Policy Matters contours its work to each state's unique policies, context, and needs. The effort is highly interactive, guided by a comprehensive team from each state and representatives from Teachers College, Columbia University. The work is carried out over an 18-month period and is distinguished from other efforts in its: (i) commitment to producing highly individualized policy strategies for each state; (ii) inclusion of many stakeholders representing diverse disciplines including early care and education, health, mental health, family support, and K-3 education; and (iii) short-term policy utility within the framework of a long-term vision. Currently, the project is working in Colorado, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Ohio and plans are underway to expand to other states. This work is funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

POLICY MATTERS WORK IN MISSISSIPPI

The Mississippi Team

A team of Mississippi stakeholders representing a range of professional perspectives on school readiness began work on the Policy Matters for School Readiness Project in April of 2003.

The team included representatives from:

- Catholic Charities
- Day Care Licensure, MS Department of Health
- Early Childhood Institute at Mississippi State University
- Governor's Office
- Head Start
- Independent Child Care Providers
- Institute for Disabilities, University of Southern Mississippi
- Interagency System of Care
- John C. Stennis Institute of Government, Mississippi State University
- MS Department of Education
- MS Department of Finance and Administration
- MS Department of Health
- MS Department of Human Services
- MS Department of Medicaid and Child Health Insurance Program
- MS Department of Mental Health
- MS Forum on Children/Families
- Mississippi State University Social Science Research Center
- Mississippi State University Extension Service
- University Medical Center

This work builds on past work in Mississippi focused on comprehensive planning and data collection as a part of the Financing Universal Early Care and Education project. It also compliments current state-based efforts such as the Child Care Census and the Department of Health's work on Early Childhood Systems Building.

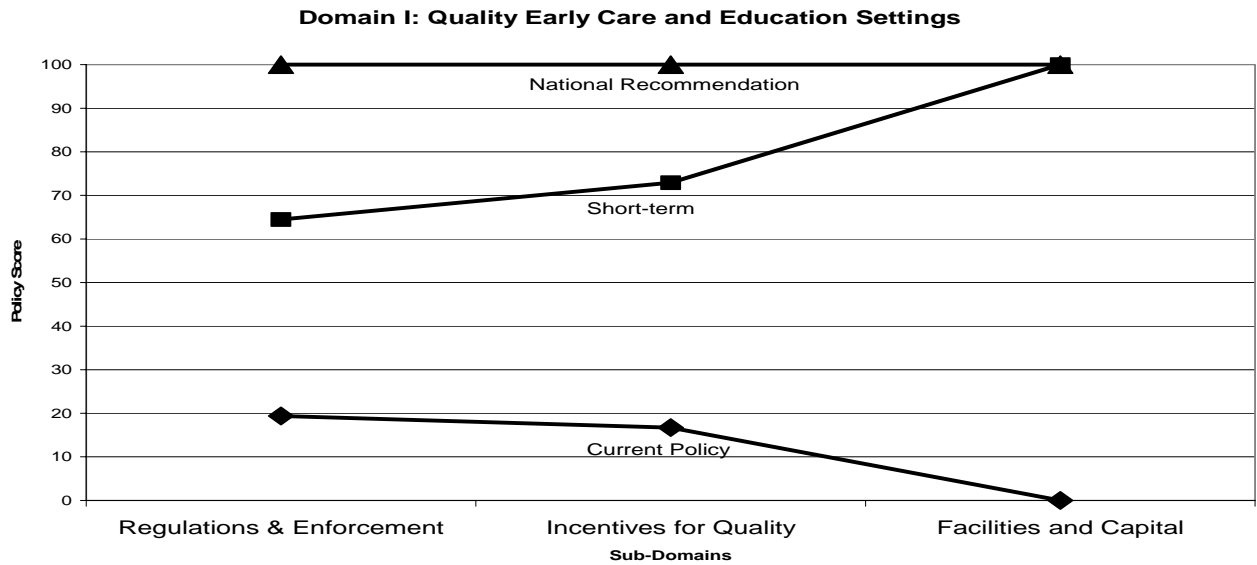
Phase I: Audit of Mississippi's Current School Readiness Policies

In order to have new policies constructed in a way that will foster the development of an early care and education system, extant and proposed policies must be understood within the context of a comprehensive approach to a system. Policy Matters defines an early learning system as consisting of eight interrelated domains:

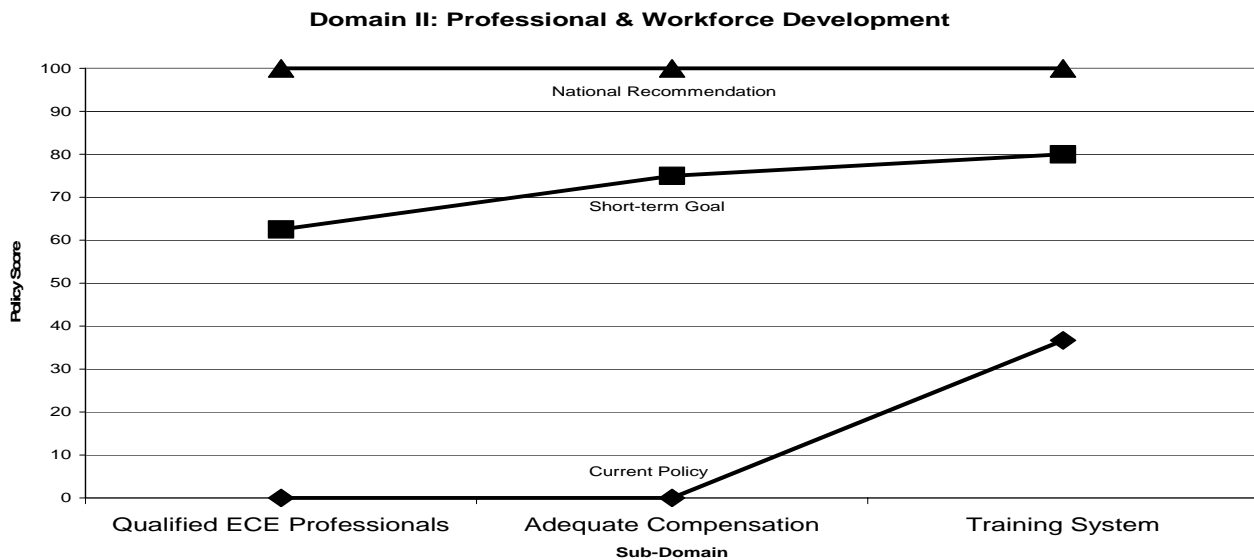
- I. Quality Early Care and Education Settings
- II. Professional and Workforce Development
- III. Informed Families, Informed Public
- IV. Governance and Coordination
- V. Accountability and Results Orientation
- VI. Adequate Early Care and Education Financing
- VII. Education in the Early Grades
- VIII. Health and Mental Health

For each domain, there are a series of sub-domains, and a series of policy options. In the first phase of the Policy Matters project, approximately 100 specific state policy options that, together, compose a system of early care and education, were examined by the state's team. This audit was completed between December 2003 and February 2004 by knowledgeable officials. The results of this audit were then reviewed by the entire Policy Matters team who set short-term goals for each specific policy option. These results are aggregated and presented below in state profiles, one for each of the eight domains listed above. Each profile includes three lines: (1) Mississippi's current policies (line with diamonds); (2) Mississippi's goal policy levels (line with squares); and (3) nationally-recommended policy levels (line with triangles) providing a visually crisp comparative portrait for each domain. All data are scored on a scale of 0 (state policy does not address this feature) to 100 (meets nationally-recommended policy standards) to make it easier to compare across policy areas. On the following pages, each domain's profile is presented. These profiles provide a snapshot of Mississippi current and goal policies as of Spring 2004, which may have shifted to some degree since the audit was completed.

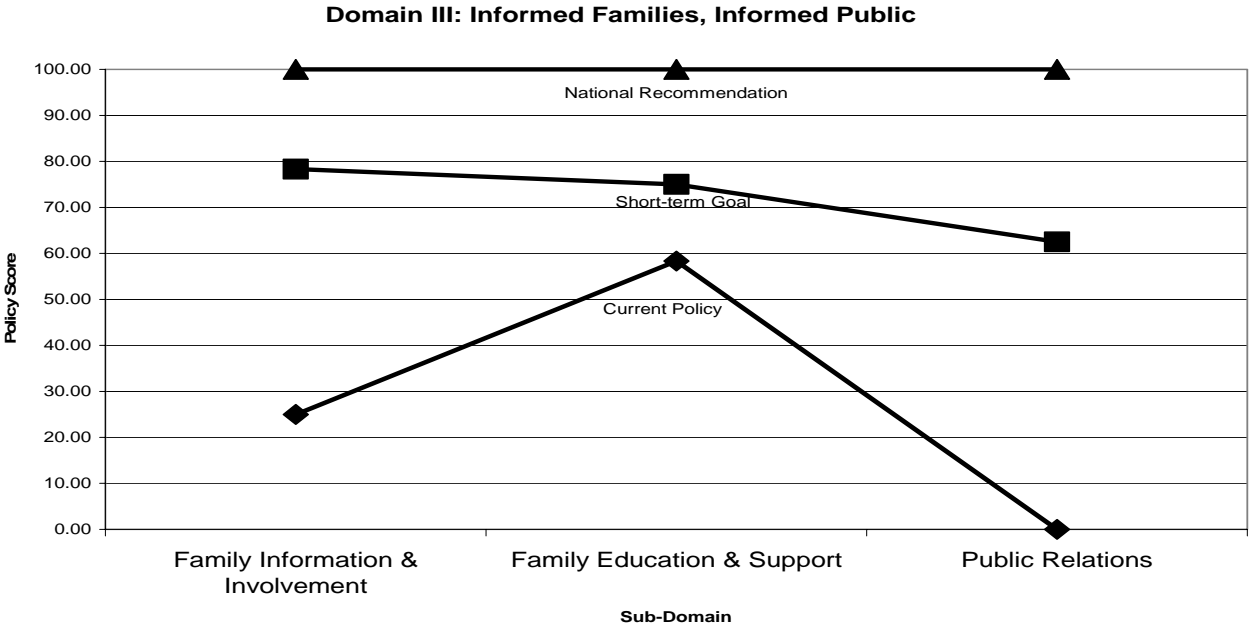
The first domain, *Quality Early Care and Education Settings*, includes three sub-domains: regulations and enforcement; incentives for quality; and facilities and capital. Mississippi’s state profiles highlight significant gaps between current state policy and the goals set by the Mississippi Policy Matters team. A particularly large gap was seen for the facilities and capital sub-domain that assesses state policies aimed at increasing supply of quality early care and education settings in the state through investment in supply.



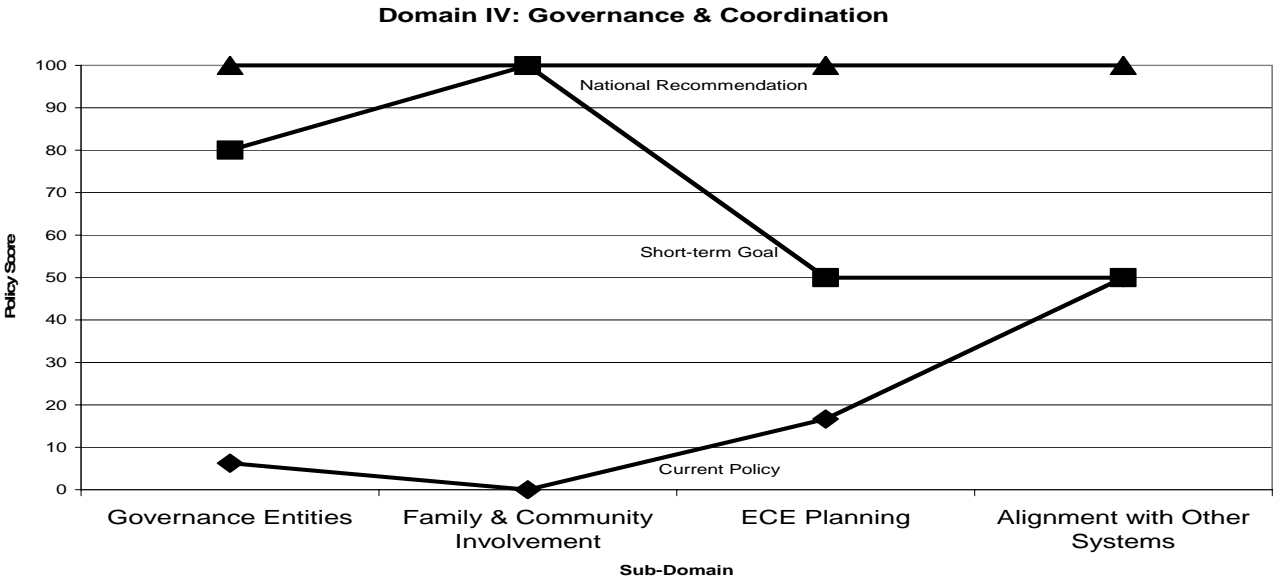
The second domain, *Professional and Workforce Development*, includes three sub-domains: qualified early care and education professionals, adequate compensation, and training systems. In this domain, the largest gap between current policy and the Mississippi Policy Matters team’s goal was for adequate compensation of early care and education providers, which captures the degree of inequity between public school teachers and teachers in early learning programs.



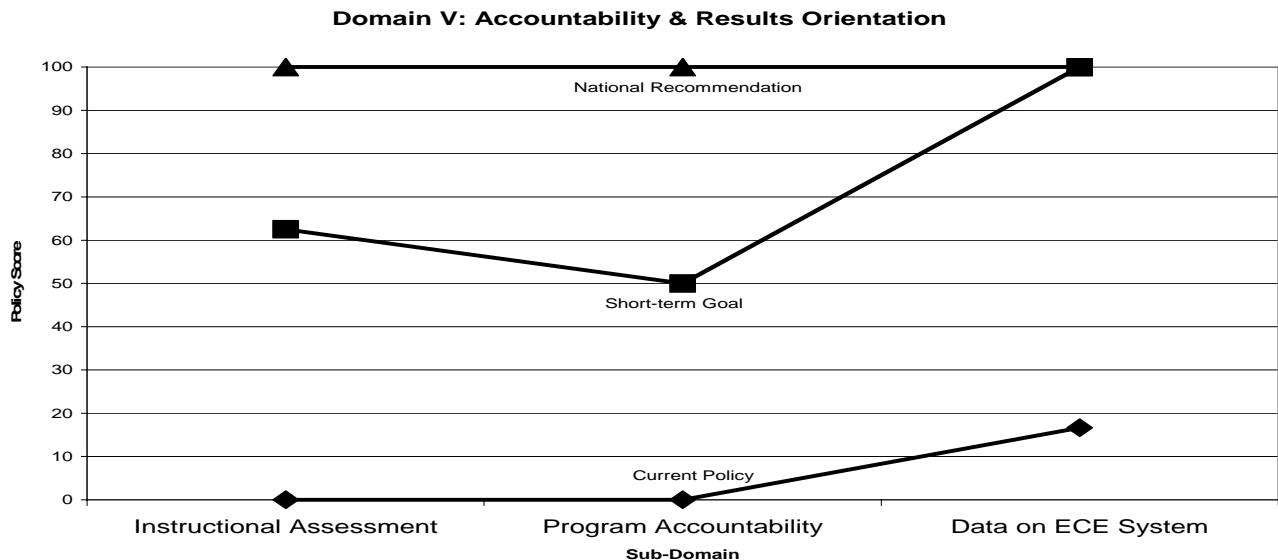
The third domain, *Informed Families and Informed Public*, examines state policies in three domains: family information and involvement, family education and support, and public relations. Mississippi's family education and support policies are close to state goals, while the other areas have particularly large gaps.



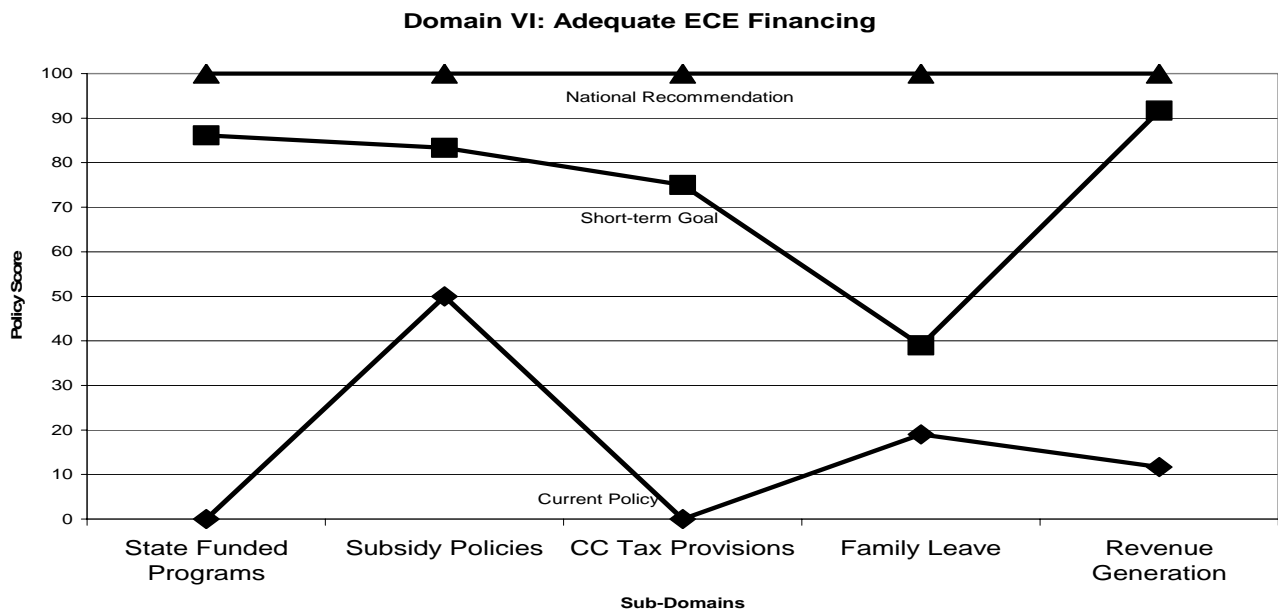
The fourth domain, *Governance and Coordination*, includes four sub-domains: governance entities, family and community involvement in governance, early care and education planning, and alignment between early childhood and other systems. Large gaps were seen between current and goal policies related to governance entities and family/community involvement in those entities, while Mississippi policy was closer or at goal levels in the other two sub-domains.



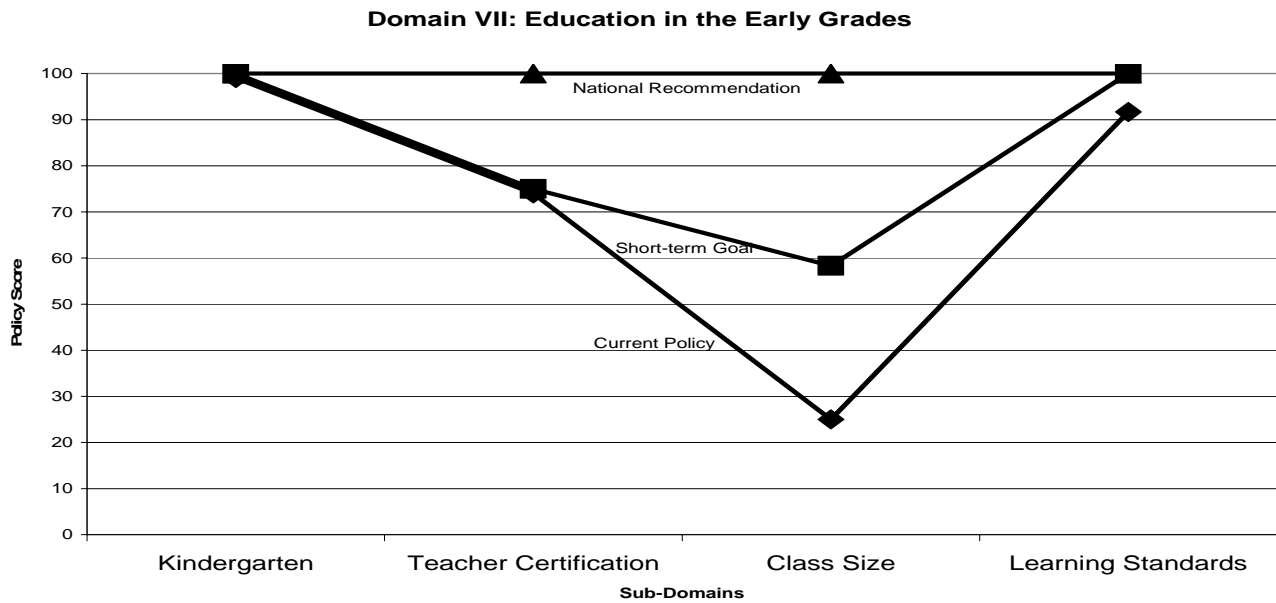
The fifth domain, *Accountability and Results Orientation*, includes three sub-domains: instructional assessment, program accountability, and data on the early care and education system. In all three areas, Mississippi policy is lagging behind the goals set by the Policy Matters team.



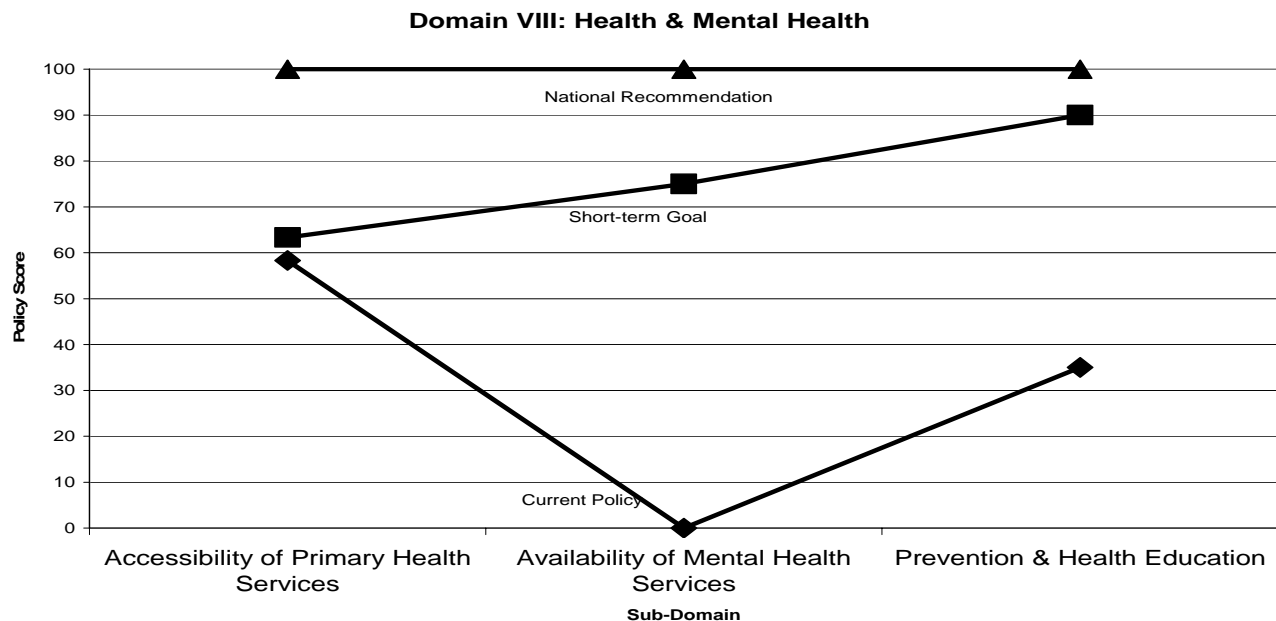
The sixth domain, *Adequate Early Care and Education Financing*, examines funding levels and allocation for five sub-domains: state-funded programs, child care subsidies, child care tax provisions, family leave, and revenue generation strategies. Mississippi's current and desired policy levels were most closely aligned in the area of family leave with substantial gaps evident in state funding for ECE programs, child care tax provisions that would reimburse families for a portion of their child care expenses, and overall revenue generation efforts.



The seventh domain, *Education in the Early Grades*, is the domain in which Mississippi policy is at or close to the state's policy goals; meeting national recommendations are Mississippi's policies that provide full-day kindergarten to the state's children.



The eighth domain, *Health and Mental Health*, considers state policies in three sub-domains: accessibility of primary health services, availability of mental health services, and prevention and health education. State eligibility policies for children's primary health services are near state-set goals, while policies affecting the availability of mental health services and prevention/health education are further from the state's goal level.



Potential Policy Priorities

Across the eight state policy profiles, certain areas stand out. Three sub-domains had particularly high scores: provision of kindergarten, K-3 teacher certification, and K-3 learning standards. All three of these high-scoring sub-domains were in *Domain VII: Education in the Early Grades* with no other policy area receiving such high scores. The contrast between Mississippi's leading kindergarten policies and the lower scores on early care and education policy domains is striking. In particular, Mississippi is weak on an early care and education infrastructure with few governance and coordination mechanisms, as well as limited state funding.

Despite the increase in and spread of state-funded early care and education programs across the U.S., Mississippi has not yet created a state-specific program and provides no state funding for early care and education programs beyond the Child Care and Development Fund matching requirement. The dedication of additional state funds would increase access to early care and education services and would generate greater demand for providers in urban and rural communities across Mississippi. Along with the development of state programs, Mississippi could take full advantage of federal funding streams by investing enough state money to draw down the maximum federal funding. Since two of Mississippi's leading sub-domains, accessibility of primary health services and child care subsidy policies, rely on significant federal funding it is important to maximize state investment in these areas.

In addition to desiring more support for direct services, the state audit also identified a desire for greater emphasis on the infrastructure needed to support higher quality care and education. Specifically, the following infrastructure elements were found to have large gaps between current and desired policy levels: the need for governance entities to coordinate early care and education policies across programs and departments, the goal of systematic gathering of state-wide data on early care and education to inform policymaking, the provision of tax provisions to reimburse families for a portion of their child care costs, and the need to increase availability of mental health services for children and families

Phase II: Assessment of Mississippi's Policymaking Context

In order to identify the policy options most feasible in Mississippi, two types of data were gathered on Mississippi's policymaking context. First, political context data were gathered on Mississippi's economic, institutional, and political context from administrative data, census data, and measures of institutional strength developed in prior research. Second, to gather political process data, a confidential, on-line survey of key stakeholders in Mississippi was conducted. Individuals invited to participate were identified by the Mississippi Policy Matters team. Respondents ($N=27$) included: government officials, early childhood advocates, foundation representatives, providers of early childhood services, providers of health/mental health services, researchers, and representatives of higher education institutions.

Political Context Data

Both policymaking and service delivery in Mississippi must recognize the state's unique demographic, economic, and political context. Mississippi is a comparatively rural state (with 36% of its population living in metropolitan areas compared to an average of 80% in the US as a whole and an average of 66% in Mississippi's neighboring states). In addition, Mississippi has a larger percent of families in poverty (17%) than does the US as a whole (9%) or Mississippi's neighbors (13%). Along with these high poverty rates, other economic indicators suggest that the economic context is challenging: high unemployment rate (6.8% versus 5.8% nationally and 5.6% among Mississippi's neighbors) and lower than average per capita gross state product (\$24,660 vs. \$35,226 nationally and \$28,617 among neighboring states). These economic challenges make it harder for the state to finance a system of early care and education.

However, the institutional context in Mississippi may provide some opportunities for policy change. Mississippi has a relatively large citizen legislature (174 legislators versus an average of 148 nationally and 138 among neighboring states). Due to the size of Mississippi's population, this results in a much smaller ratio of citizens to legislators than found in other states. In fact, Mississippi legislators represent less than half as many citizens (ratio of 16,504:1) than do legislators in other states (38,986:1) or in neighboring states (31,792:1). This low ratio may lead legislators to be more responsive to their constituents. Also, there are no official term limits and very low turnover of legislators in the Mississippi legislature suggesting that time invested in educating legislators about early childhood issues could pay off in future policy debates. Another aspect of the Mississippi political context is a relative conservatism of the state's citizenry. In public opinion polls, 47% of Mississippians identified themselves as conservative, compared to 34% nationwide and 41% in neighboring states.

Political Process Data

To compliment this comparative data on Mississippi's demographic, economic, and political context, our on-line survey of key stakeholders focused on the following areas: nature and capacity of advocacy efforts; nature and degree of collaboration; potential funding strategies; and issues generating momentum.

Nature and Capacity of Advocacy Efforts: Respondents rated the effectiveness of a broad range of state agencies, groups, and initiatives working on early childhood policy issues. Among these, the majority of respondents identified three agencies, five initiatives, and five groups as particularly supportive of a comprehensive approach to early childhood policy development. These agencies, initiatives, and groups, along with others, fulfill many of the key functions needed for the development of a comprehensive approach to school readiness policy. Yet, some areas need development among the Mississippi school readiness advocacy community. Four areas related to public will suggested particular areas that might be addressed in future efforts:

- Generating broad public will for early care and education policy change
- Promoting buy-in for early care and education policy priorities among key stakeholders
- Regularly assessing public opinion and coordinating message development
- Garnering broad-based financial support for advocacy and lobbying efforts

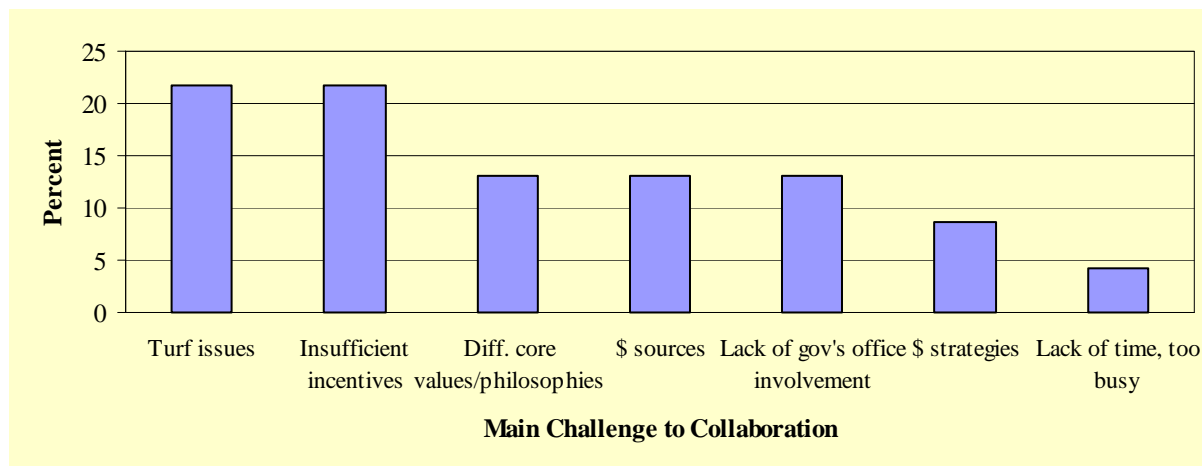
Nature and Degree of Collaboration: Respondents indicated that state agencies responsible for early childhood programs collaborated formally on a semi-annual basis with informal collaboration occurring nearly monthly. Yet, as shown in figure below, the majority of respondents reported that they would like to see increased collaboration among state agencies responsible for early childhood programs and policies.

Current Level of State Agency Collaboration



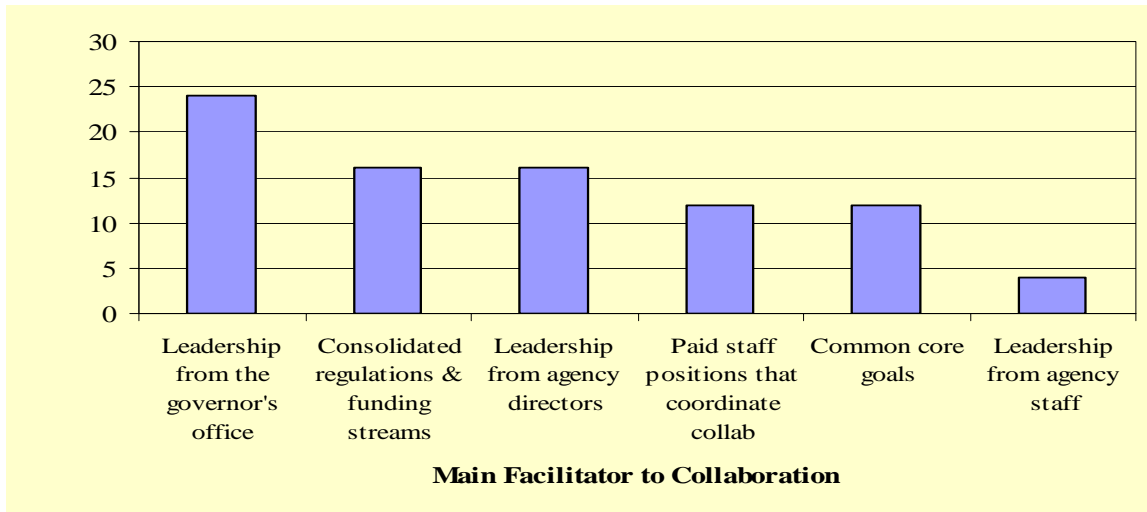
Respondents provided insight into the facilitators and barriers to increased state agency collaboration. As shown in the Figure below, major challenges to state agency collaboration include turf issues and insufficient incentives to collaborate, while very few respondents identified lack of time as a significant barrier.

Challenges to State Agency Collaboration



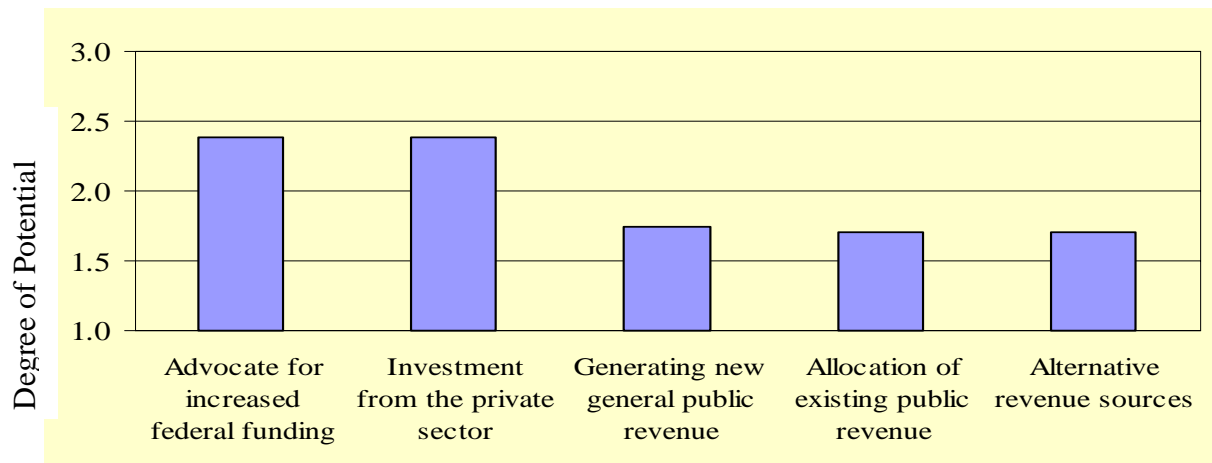
As shown below, major facilitators that support increased state agency collaboration include: leadership from the governor’s office; consolidated regulations and funding streams; and leadership from agency directors.

Facilitators of State Agency Collaboration



Potential Funding Strategies: With high levels of poverty and current economic shortages in Mississippi, the most promising potential funding sources (see figure below) were reported to be either increased federal funding or increased investment from the private sector. Generating new general public revenue, re-allocating existing public revenue, or generating alternative revenue sources were seen as approaches that had less potential in the current economic context. In order to support increased revenue generation for young children from federal or private sources, respondents indicated that diverse and new advocacy voices are needed to speak on behalf of this issue. Since many elected officials and the business community were identified as potential effective voices, outreach needs to focus on those groups to elicit their support and involvement on early childhood issues. Respondents also indicated that the most effective messages linked early childhood to broader educational and economic development issues with greater political salience.

Potential Funding Mechanisms



Issues Generating Momentum: Respondents identified four areas generating policy momentum in Mississippi: (1) The creation of a universal, voluntary pre-kindergarten program; (2) Collaboration between existing early care and education programs (Head Start, centers, family child care); (3) National focus on health and education (including NCLB, standards and assessment); and (4) Early intervention and early childhood mental health. These policy areas may be good vehicles for additional early care and education policy development.

Potential Policy Strategies for Mississippi's Political and Policy Context

Policy effort can be focused on changes that require minimal new investment or use untapped resources. Within this approach, one important strategy is increasing coordination among agencies and stakeholders working in early care and education. Incentives to collaborate and to overcome existing turf issues are needed, with a particular emphasis on enhancing coordination between the agencies governed by an elected agency head versus an appointed agency head. Other high-priority governance and infrastructure policy improvements can also be pursued with modest new investment, such as: systematic gathering of state-wide data on early care and education to inform policymaking, enhancing safeguards for quality through child care regulatory policy, development of instructional assessments for young children, increasing involvement of parents and community members in early care and education governance, and making parent information more available to Mississippi's families.

An important component of any political strategy is the broadening of the advocacy coalition supportive of early care and education policy. Efforts can be made to include additional groups and perspectives to speak on the importance of early care and education and other comprehensive early childhood efforts – particularly business, education, and economic experts or groups. Like services for young children, these different voices need to be coordinated to express a consistent message across the state.

Policy development in Mississippi can also build on its strengths to garner additional financial support for early care and education. A particular strength of Mississippi's political context is the range of involved stakeholders and the interest of the business community. Stakeholders inside government may be effective partners in advocating for drawing down all possible federal money for early care and education, while the business community may be engaged through efforts to create public-private partnerships or otherwise leverage private funds. Despite the state's limited economic resources, which make new investment very hard to procure, it still seems prudent to push for a small initial investment that can be built upon later during better economic times.

Phase III: Identified Priority Policy Areas

Rather than setting broad goals, Policy Matters asks states to identify their top policy priorities and then propose specific, actionable policy changes to be implemented in the next few years. The selection of these priorities is informed by the work in the earlier two phases. The policy audit conducted in Phase I catalogues the state's current policy, as well as identifies the largest gaps between state policies and state-set goals. The assessment of the political context from Phase II allows for the realities of the political and economic context to inform the selection of policy priorities. To assist states in implementing these policies, the final element of the Policy Matters effort is to develop an

“action tool,” which is a usable document, such as: draft legislation, regulatory reforms, policy brief that can be used by states in part or in its entirety.

After analyzing and discussing the information from the Policy Audit and Political Context Assessment, Mississippi identified three areas as top policy priorities: (1) Generate new revenue for early care and education programs; (2) Increase availability of mental health services; and (3) Establish governance and coordination mechanisms. Possible actions were identified by the Mississippi Policy Matters team for each priority area, as listed below.

1. **Generate New Revenue for Early Care and Education Programs:** In order to increase the supply of available, affordable, high-quality early childhood services, additional funding is needed.
 - Possible actions include: continue to invest TANF funds in child care, invest full state match in CCDF and TANF to maximize available federal funds, establish legislation for a pilot program aimed at generating intergovernmental revenue for early childhood quality programs, pilot connection with community colleges for early childhood teacher preparation, provide tax incentives for corporations to donate funds/services to early childhood quality incentives, reallocate federal block grant funding to early childhood, and develop public education campaign to support early childhood financing
2. **Increase Availability of Mental Health Services:** In order to address children’s mental health needs, state policies must promote greater availability of services.
 - Possible actions include: Extend early intervention (part C) services for children age 3-5 with social-emotional delays; expand family support services to families; and provide incentives for child psychiatrists and psychologists to practice in Mississippi.
3. **Establish Governance and Coordination Mechanisms:** State and local governance entities should increase inter-agency coordination, as well as the efficiency of services provided to children and families.
 - Possible actions include: Strengthening inter-agency coordinating efforts through the Advisory Task Force to the Inter-agency Early Childhood Council; coordinating state services providing services to children formally or informally at the state level; and developing a Department for Children.

Action Tool

The final step of the Policy Matters project is the development of an action tool for use by state policymakers working on one of the identified priorities. This process was adapted somewhat in Mississippi in response to a major change in state child care policy.

On October 1, 2004 the Mississippi State Department of Human Services made an administrative policy change that limited families’ ability to receive child care subsidies. As a result of technical rule changes, two groups of parents were excluded from receiving child care subsidies: (1) Full-time college students who are unable to work at least 25 hours per week in addition to attending school and caring for their families; and (2) Single parents who are not enrolled in the state-administered child support system and/or were not approved through the waiver process (although at the time the availability of waivers was not widely communicated to single parents or child care providers). These

changes jeopardize the educational and economic goals of Mississippi by denying early education interventions to potentially thousands of Mississippi’s most at-risk children and by making it even harder for their parents to gain the educational skills and work experience needed to lift their families above the poverty line. In fact, just weeks after implementation of these changes, an estimated 47% of children receiving child care subsidies lost their subsidies.

This policy change and the resulting decrease in subsidy usage were particularly problematic in light of the findings from the state policy audit. Mississippi does not invest in early childhood programs as many other states do. As a result, the federal funding through the Child Care and Development Fund is the primary funding and program providing access and enhancing affordability to child care for low-income families. In fact, the state policy audit identified real strengths among Mississippi’s policy choices related to use of the federal block grant. For these reasons, the recent change in eligibility rules was of primary concern and deemed to be more urgent than the other policy priorities in the short-run and, therefore, was selected for focus of the action tool. In particular, the Teachers College Policy Matters team was asked to develop two items: The first of which was an advocacy strategy for use in Mississippi focused on reversal of these recent policy changes. This strategy was directly informed by data gathered for the state profiles and the assessment of the political context. The second item was a policy brief (pictured below) that synthesizes additional research conducted by the Policy Matters research team on other states’ subsidy policies, recent policy changes, and the research

Policy brief developed for use in Mississippi

**RECENT ACTIONS BY THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
JEOPARDIZE MISSISSIPPI’S EDUCATIONAL AND ECONOMIC FUTURE**

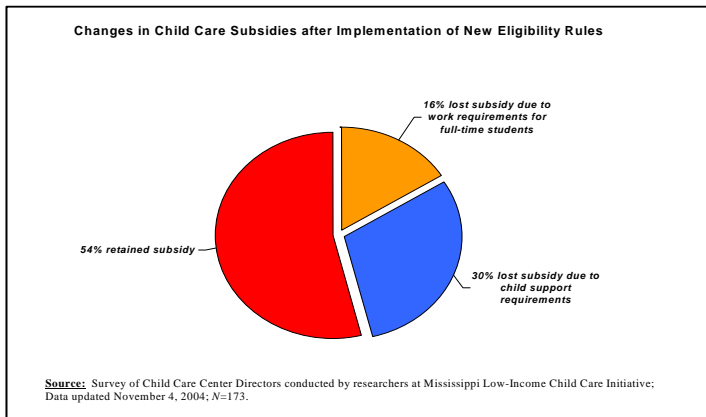
A Policy Brief Prepared by the National Center for Children and Families
for the Mississippi State University Early Childhood Institute

November 5, 2004

New rules issued by the Department of Human Services limit families’ ability to receive child care subsidies. These changes jeopardize the educational and economic goals of Mississippi by denying early education interventions to potentially thousands of Mississippi’s most at-risk children and by making it even harder for their parents to gain the educational skills and work experience needed to lift their families above the poverty line.

As a result of technical rule changes, two groups of parents are now excluded from receiving child care subsidies: (1) Full-time college students who are unable to work at least 25 hours per week in addition to attending school and caring for their families; and (2) Single parents who are not enrolled in the state-administered child support system – regardless of parents’ reasons for not wanting to enroll. After implementation of these changes, an estimated 47% of children receiving child care subsidies lost their subsidies.¹ As a result, parents’ work has been disrupted; children’s attachment to their caregivers has been severed; and many independent, small-business child care centers have had to close operations, lay off staff, or reduce purchases of instructional material for children.²

These changes are not required by federal or state law and are not in the best interest of Mississippi’s citizens. In addition to undermining recent steps forward in providing early education to young children, these changes threaten the success of Mississippi’s welfare reform by making it more difficult for families to keep themselves out of the welfare system. The cost of these policies is too great for Mississippi’s children and families, as well as for the state itself. These eligibility changes should be reversed.



rationale for reversal of the subsidy eligibility policies. In short, the policy brief argued that the recent changes are not required by federal or state law and are not in the best interest of Mississippi’s citizens. In addition to undermining recent steps forward in providing early education to young children, these changes threaten the success of Mississippi’s welfare reform by making it more difficult for families to achieve higher education, maintain employment, and keep themselves out of the welfare system.

This policy brief has been used by Mississippi advocates to summarize and focus policymakers’ attention on these important policy changes. As a result of this attention, it has been proposed that the work requirement will be lessened (to 15 hours a week) for full-time students. It is expected that this change will go into effect this summer. In addition, the state clarified that a waiver was available for mothers to request exemption from the paternity establishment requirement. To publicize the availability of this waiver, a non-profit entity has offered to mail a letter and a copy of the form to all child care centers in the state.

The recent changes in child care subsidy also raise important issues for Mississippi from a broader perspective related to establishing an early care and education “system” in the state. With almost all of the public funding for child care provided through one program, such as the child care subsidy system, even minor changes to the child care subsidy system (such as these changes in eligibility rules) can have dramatic effects on the availability of child care for Mississippi’s families. Another characteristic of the Mississippi political context highlighted by this recent policy development is the lack of collaborative planning among the agencies involved with early care and education in the state. Much of this may be due to institutional differences between the departments, such as whether the agency head is elected, appointed by the governor, or appointed by a state board.

Since Policy Matters found regulation and administrative practices to be common policy tools used for early care and education in Mississippi, it is not surprising that changes to the child care subsidy system can be made easily with little to no involvement by the legislature. Since the Department of Human Services agency director is appointed by the governor, shifts in administration can lead easily to changes in the subsidy program. In order to promote greater consistency across administrations, legislators would need to be brought into the decision-making process regarding changes to the child care subsidy system. A requirement for legislative approval of eligibility changes or a legislatively-instituted eligibility floor would protect families from rapid changes in eligibility and the resulting loss of child care services.

NEXT STEPS IN MISSISSIPPI

We recommend that Mississippi early care and education advocacy efforts continue to focus on issues of child care subsidy eligibility. Currently, this is the primary source of assistance for early care and education in the state and continuity and access for families should be a primary goal. Legislative strategies to clarify the eligibility rules and the process for eligibility changes may increase consistency of access for children.

In addition to this work on the child care subsidies, we encourage Mississippi to address the three policy areas identified as particularly important during the Policy Matters project.

- **Revenue Generation/Creation of State-Funded Early Care and Education Programs:** In order to increase the supply of available, affordable, high-quality early childhood services, additional funding is needed. Continue with the identified policy priority to increase revenue dedicated to early care and education. Three approaches, which can be pursued along parallel tracks, seem most promising: (1) invest at least a small amount of state dollars in pre-kindergarten or another state program; (2) invest the full amount needed to draw down full federal block grants; and (3) promote private investment through public-private partnerships.
- **Availability of Mental Health Services:** In order to address children’s mental health needs, state policies must promote greater availability of services. This was one of the areas with the greatest gaps between Mississippi’s current and goal policies.

- **Governance and Coordination:** State and local governance entities should increase inter-agency coordination, as well as the efficiency of services provided to children and families. Incentives to collaborate and plan together, as well as overcome existing turf issues, are needed with a particular need to enhance coordination between the agencies governed by an elected agency head versus an appointed agency head. Coordination may be advanced by capitalizing on the governance structures already in place – most notably the Inter-agency Early Childhood Council and its Advisory Task Force.

Other foci areas consist of high-priority, but low-cost, policy changes that can coordinate and support an early care and education system. These “big bang for your buck” policy possibilities include: increasing the systematic gathering of state-wide data on early care and education to inform policymaking, enhancing safeguards for quality through child care regulatory policy, developing instructional assessments for young children, increasing involvement of parents and community members in early care and education governance, and making parent information more available to Mississippi’s families.

To support these recommended policy changes, political support will need to be generated. Greater support can be generated by broadening the range of voices speaking on behalf of early care and education. Groups that may be particularly effective messengers include: business, education, the faith community and economic experts or groups. Like services for young children, these different voices need to be coordinated to express a consistent message across the state. One potential message builds on Mississippi’s policy strengths in the area of Kindergarten and early grades to make the argument that the state’s investment in education will reap greater benefits if paired with investment in early care and education programs that promote children’s school readiness. In light of current efforts under federal education reform, the gaps in school readiness may be of particular interest to policymakers. In addition, messages linked to the role of early childhood programs, services, and investments in promoting economic development may be effective.

For additional information about Policy Matters, Contact Sharon Lynn Kagan at the National Center for Children and Families, Teachers College, Columbia University 525 West 120th Street, Box 226; New York, NY 10027; 212-678-8255; <http://nccf.tc.columbia.edu>