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EVENT BRIEF

ZERO TO THREE NATIONAL CENTER FOR INFANTS, TODDLERS, AND FAMILIES AND ED HOST AN EARLY LEARNING WEBINAR ON LITERACY

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On Wednesday, June 16, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and the national nonprofit Zero to Three hosted a webinar, “Building Connections to Support Literacy: Systems of Early Learning for Children Birth to Age 8.” Both Janice Im, Director of Programs at Zero to Three, and Rosemary Fennell, Program Manager, Early Childhood and Reading Group at ED, provided opening remarks and explained this session was just one of several pre-conference events being held for participants who will be attending the Reading Institute, hosted by ED in Anaheim, CA in July.

PANELISTS

- Jacqueline Jones, Senior Advisor to the Secretary for Early Learning, U.S. Department of Education
- Florence Nelson, Project Director of State Policy Initiatives, Zero to Three
- Ross Thompson, Professor of Psychology, University of California, Davis
- Peter Mangione, Co-Director, WestEd Center for Child and Family Studies
- Carolyn Stevens, Senior Program Analyst, Military Community & Family Policy

SUMMARY

Jacqueline Jones set the tone for the webinar by emphasizing how critically important ED believes it is to expose young children to literacy starting from birth. This sense of urgency Jones hoped, will incite Members of Congress to include these early learning ideas into school reform and the reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

Florence Nelson described the landscape for early learning in the United States observing that little investment is made in children from birth to three across the 50 states. Luckily, states have begun to look at how they can improve early learning systems acknowledging more and more the need to set standards, improve professionalism, and increase accountability for quality programs. Already 18 states have begun to encourage the development of core knowledge and competencies for

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teachers of children birth to five, specialist networks, and quality rating and improvement systems.

When introducing **Dr. Thompson**, Nelson pointed out that his research provides strong scientifically-based evidence for why investment in early learning is so important. Dr. Thompson described supporting early brain development as a critical component to close the achievement gap in this country. This gap starts early, Thompson stated, explaining that it begins in the first six months of a child's life, and by age three it can be significant. Large gaps begin with vocabulary acquisition and growth which is why children are immediately advantaged or disadvantaged by their family background. Thompson explained that social interaction aids in a baby's mastery of language and reading to babies stimulates their language and literacy skills. Moreover, these early literacy experiences predict language and reading achievement in elementary school. A high-quality early learning environment, however, Thompson said, looks much different than a high-quality learning environment for older children. Thompson proposed that what children zero to five need is a language-rich environment; constant social interaction with peers and adults; small group sizes with a high adult-to-child ratio; and warm, responsive adult-child interactions.

Peter Mangione's research focused on the state of California's learning and development system. Mangione explained that toddlers don't benefit from adult-organized, adult-directed group instruction. Instead he found that toddlers learn from each other and imitate adults. In their very early lives, children begin to develop their identity and expectations of how others are going to treat them. Supporting what Thompson had already alluded to, Mangione put forth what he believes are the underlying principles for birth-to-five education: 1) the central role of relationships and social-emotional competence; 2) the fundamental role of the family; and 3) the importance of relating to the child as an active, curious learner. He pointed out that it is critically important to incorporate links between the different periods of a child's stage in life when language and literacy standards and curriculum are written. . The curriculum, in particular, should reflect appropriate adaptations to each period. Inside the classroom, teachers should focus on developing an emotionally positive teacher-child relationship and should develop literacy skills through books, songs, and word play. Mangione concluded his remarks by emphasizing the need for all teachers and program directors to understand the development stages during a child's early life and to have the ability to appropriately support early language and literacy learning during these different stages.

Carolyn Stevens described the Department of Defense's (DOD) Development System of Care and how their child development program supports early literacy. At the DOD facilities, a design guide and criteria is used and ensures consistency in the construction of both the indoor and outdoor learning environments. All facilities are language-rich environments with quality books available and learning centers that include writing and dramatic play. Knowing that staff training is a critical component to providing quality early childhood care , the DOD provides instruction that supports literacy. Additionally, they target opportunities to engage parents in both a formal and informal setting. Stevens

emphasized, once again, the need for continued professional development for staff to provide efficient instruction to early learners.

CONCLUSION

Wrapping up the webinar, Nelson summarized the important role state governments play in developing early learning advisory councils; supporting intensive professional development training; and establishing minimum standards for early learners. Furthermore, financing is a fundamental component to providing the quality of services necessary to educate young learners. Most importantly, Nelson stated, “engaging parents as partners” is paramount to closing the achievement gap.

The next webinar to support the preparation of the Reading Institute will be held on June 29.

To view additional materials please visit: www.zerotothree.org/policy and to access the webinar please visit www.zerotothree.org/literacywebinar.