

Southern Regional Initiative on Child Care
Task Force Meeting
January 14-15, 2004
Washington, DC

The Southern Regional Initiative on Child Care is focused on improving access to quality, affordable child care and early education in the South. The Southern Institute on Children and Families established the Southern Regional Initiative on Child Care in January 2000 with support from The David and Lucile Packard Foundation. The Initiative is guided by a 24-member Southern Regional Task Force on Child Care composed of gubernatorial representatives from 17 southern states, a mayoral appointee representing the District of Columbia, a representative of the Southern Growth Policies Board and representatives appointed by the Southern Institute. States participating in the Initiative are Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia.

The initial charge to the Task Force was to collaborate in the development of a plan of action to improve access to child care financial assistance for low-income families in the southern region. The Southern Institute commissioned an extensive state survey on financial aid policies and procedures, and the Task Force held hearings across the South to collect information on public and private child care financial aid programs and strategies. This information guided the Task Force in the development of a southern regional action plan, which was released in December 2003. Once implementation activities were underway, the Task Force embarked upon the development of a southern regional action plan to improve child care quality. This report provides information on the Initiative's two action plans:

- ***Action Plan to Improve Access to Child Care Assistance for Low-Income Families in the South***; and
- ***Southern Regional Action Plan to Improve the Quality of Early Care and Education***

Since 2001 the Southern Institute has tracked states' progress on achieving the 10 goals and 52 action steps of the ***Action Plan to Improve Access to Child Care Assistance for Low-Income Families in the South***. In 2003 the initiative began tracking states' progress on the seven goals and 39 action steps of the 2002 ***Southern Regional Action Plan to Improve the Quality of Early Care and Education***. Annual state implementation reports are compiled and published by the Southern Institute, and document actions taken on each goal prior to and following publication of the two plans. Implementation surveys provide information to state and federal officials, advocates and researchers and also give respondents the opportunity to communicate on challenges, opportunities, progress and retrenchments experienced in the southern states.

For additional information on the Southern Regional Initiative on Child Care, please visit the Southern Institute on Children and Families website at www.thesoutherninstitute.org.

Information on Selected Federal/State Action Steps Set Forth by the Southern Regional Task Force on Child Care

Child care assistance and early education are key to state, local and federal efforts to build workforce capacity, support welfare reform and improve the readiness of young children to succeed in school.

Child Care Financial Assistance is an Important Workforce Support Service for Low-Income Families in the South

- 14 out of 17 southern states exceed the national average of mothers working outside the home.
- The number of single-parent families, most headed by women, more than doubled in 30 years. Single parents typically use more hours of child care per week to work full-time.
- On average, child care is the third largest expense for all families with preschool children, after housing and food.
- The annual cost to enroll a four-year old in a full-time child care center exceeds the annual cost of public college tuition for one child in every southern state (see Chart 1).
- The *Action Plan to Improve Access to Child Care Assistance for Low-Income Families in the South* states that federal, state, local and private funds should be sufficient to meet 100% of the need for direct child care assistance. The Action Plan specifies that federal funding for the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) should be increased to fulfill current policy allowing federal matching funds for child care assistance up to 85% of the state median income to assist states in providing child care subsidies to all eligible families who seek child care assistance.

All Children and Families Should Have the Benefit of a Quality, Comprehensive Early Care and Education System

- Eight to 14 southern states do not meet nationally recognized quality standards for staff-child ratios specified by age group (see Table 1).
- Of the 13 southern states that set standards for group size for children four years of age and younger, only two have established standards that meet nationally recognized quality standards for all these age groups (see Table 2).
- The *Southern Regional Action Plan to Improve the Quality of Early Care and Education* includes the following action steps:
 - 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.
 - 2) The federal government and states will provide financial incentives to support development of appropriately credentialed and adequately compensated early care and education staff, including scholarships and college loan forgiveness programs.

Additional information on the Southern Regional Initiative on Child Care, all reports, both action plans and results of state surveys can be found by visiting the Southern Institute Web site at www.thesoutherninstitute.org/childcare/index.html.