



**Testimony of HyeSook Chung, Executive Director
DC Action for Children**

**At the Performance Oversight Hearing for the
Office of the State Superintendent of Education**

**Before the Committee of the Whole Council
Of the District of Columbia**

February 25, 2011

Good afternoon, Chairman Brown and members of the Council. Thank you for the opportunity to address the Council as it reviews the performance of the Office of the State Superintendent of Education ("OSSE") during today's oversight hearing. My name is HyeSook Chung, and I am the executive director of DC Action for Children and a mother of two young students in DC Public Schools. I also serve as the interim chair of the District's Early Childhood Advisory Council, or "ECAC."

DC Action for Children is an advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all children in the District of Columbia have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

We work to accomplish our mission through four key strategies:

- Increasing public awareness of issues facing children, youth and families in the District;
- Providing research and analysis to shape and support effective public policies;
- Collaborating with partners to improve quality and access to programs and services; and,
- Empowering families, programs and communities to advocate for our youngest citizens.

DC Action is thrilled to be the new grantee of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT project for the District. The 2010 report from the DC KIDS COUNT Collaborative shows us where we have made progress and where we need to do better. As we build on this well-established baseline of data, we need to ensure that we use it to drive changes that truly make a positive impact for our children.

In particular, DC Action for Children is focused on improving outcomes for all children in the District by addressing a key issue that perpetuates the cycle of poverty for families in our city: limited access to high-quality, affordable early care and education. While universal Pre-K is a critical program in the continuum of early education, it is only one element of the broader education framework. In the District, there is a substantial shortage of available care slots for infants and toddlers. Quality care for infants and toddlers can have incredible impact and provide positive early learning experiences. The lack of quality child care for infants and toddlers is particularly acute in Wards 5, 7 and 8, where there are also the greatest concentrations of children under four whose families need care for infants and toddlers.

This past fall, we launched our High Five for DC's Children campaign, to ensure that every child in the District has what he or she needs to succeed from birth. The campaign was built around a five-point platform that included: 1) high quality child care; 2) nurturing home environments; 3) comprehensive health and wellness services; 4) qualified and supported teachers; and finally, 5) a smooth transition to kindergarten and beyond. All of us in the early care and education field are in strong agreement on the importance of these five areas, and to date, 11 advocacy organizations across the city have signed on in support of the High 5 campaign.

DC Action for Children works closely with OSSE, as well other agencies and community-based providers to improve access and quality in early care and education. I wanted to take this time to highlight a few areas where we have made progress, and make some recommendations for how we must build on this progress to improve outcomes for young children in our city.

In the past year, OSSE has had some important successes in its efforts to support early learning opportunities for low-income children. Most importantly, under the agency's current leadership, OSSE secured federal funding to launch the Early Childhood Advisory Council ("ECAC"), as required by the Head Start Reauthorization Act of 2007. The role of ECAC is to cultivate leadership and a broad vision in support of a coherent system of early care and education for children from birth through the 3rd grade, or approximately age 8. Research tells us that this window of time is critical for putting children on the path to success in school and life. If children are not proficient in math or reading by the third grade, the chances are slim that they will ever catch up -- regardless of how much we invest in remediation.

I should mention that I have been honored to serve as the chair of ECAC's infant toddler sub-committee. But while it was an important step to establish ECAC, we need to do a lot more to make it fully operational at a high performing level. We have to execute the strategic plan and most importantly to officially confirm the members of the council so that our recommendations carry real weight. As the council considers budget cuts, we must consider the need for capacity to fully staff and execute the full vision of this Council.

The second area I would like to highlight is expanding access to care for infants and toddlers. Last year, in my testimony before this committee, I called upon OSSE to increase the number of available infant toddler slots. We were pleased when OSSE responded by submitting a request for application (RFA) to providers that would allow them to provide additional slots for infants and toddlers.

Unfortunately, we were surprised and disappointed that very few providers responded to this opportunity. This underscored the reality that increasing capacity is a much more complicated issue than simply funding more slots. There are additional costs to centers associated with increasing infant toddler care, including meeting the professional development needs for qualified infant toddler specialists. After doing the math, many providers realize that it is not worth it from a business standpoint to expand their infant and toddler rooms.

One of the priorities for the ECAC is to find ways to overcome these barriers -- including incentives that make expansion a viable option for providers. We also need to address important quality control measures in the area of infant and toddler care. Currently, the District does not have a central system implemented to credential infant toddler caregivers; nor is there a network of infant toddler specialists available to support providers as they work to achieve quality. We hope that OSSE will take steps to address these needs very soon.

Thirdly, we commend OSSE for moving swiftly to identify and establish a new resource and referral agency in the city. A resource and referral agency helps parents locate quality child care providers in their neighborhoods and is required by a federal mandate. The organization, which oversaw the resource and referral agency closed its doors last fall.

The newly launched resource and referral agency will need to prioritize the Quality Rating Information System for child care -- or QRIS. Similar to ratings used for restaurants and other services, QRIS designates a quality rating associated with an early childhood or school-age program, many of which receive public funding and are responsible for the care of hundreds of thousands of children each year. Supporting the full implementation of QRIS is a win-win for the District. It would help increase the quality of early care and education for all children, it would give parents the tools to make informed decisions for their children and it would support the professional development of our child care providers.

Quality standards provide the basis for program ratings. These standards vary across states but usually include measures of professional development or the qualifications of teachers and caregivers,

the quality of the learning environment, and the involvement of parents and family members. Programs are evaluated by trained outside staff and measurement is typically conducted through direct observation and the collection and review of administrative data and program documents. As we work to strengthen the District's QRIS system ("Going for the Gold"), we must use this system to ensure that it is used rigorously to assess new settings that may not already be covered, such as infant toddler care, after-school programs and clear indicators to define "quality" teaching.

To expand on this point, we encourage OSSE to continue to build strong linkages to high-quality standards and incentives for providers. The current reimbursement rates to centers providing subsidized child care are based on market rates from 2004. While we do not have the resources to overhaul this tiered reimbursement system -- in which centers are designated Gold, Bronze, or Silver and get different levels of reimbursement accordingly -- OSSE can help providers improve their quality rating by providing technical assistance and financial incentives in the form of grants and teacher scholarships. We have been impressed with OSSE's current leadership in assessing opportunities to improve overall quality and are hopeful there will be more progress in this area.

For a quality rating system to work properly, we also need more accurate, complete and timely data. We encourage OSSE to make critical improvements to the dated paper-based data-tracking system to ensure a more systemized approach to maintaining a baseline of data. Finally, I want to commend OSSE for being extremely responsive to our requests for data on early care and education in the city, which we have started to compile for KIDS COUNT.

In summary, we believe that OSSE has led the District toward a more comprehensive approach to early care and education. We need to now accelerate better outcomes for young children and urge OSSE to do more to give providers the necessary support to bolster both quality and access.

DC Action for Children welcomes the opportunity to work in partnership with you, Chairman Brown, and with all of the members of the Council and your staff, as well as OSSE, to improve outcomes for our youngest citizens. We believe that data must be the anchor to create a city-wide Birth to 24 education plan that establishes common and defined outcomes for all children and youth in our city. Our hope is that DC Action for Children's KIDS COUNT project becomes a reliable resource for the city and will enable the Council to make informed decisions based upon evidence.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.