



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

**At the Hearing on the
“Pre-K Acceleration and Clarification Amendment Act of 2010”**

**Before the Committee of the Whole
Council of the District of Columbia
March 31, 2010**

Good morning, Chairman Gray and members of the Council. Thank you for the opportunity to address the Council as it considers the Pre-K Acceleration and Clarification Amendment Act of 2010.

My name is HyeSook Chung, and I am the Executive Director of DC Action for Children. 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 young children in the District of Columbia;
- Providing policy analysis to shape and support effective public policies for young children;
- Building and supporting a constituency base for children and their families; and
- Collaborating with other organizations and individuals to accomplish our goals.

Passage of the “Pre-K Enhancement and Expansion Act of 2008” was an important victory for young children because it seeks to ensure that all three- and four-year-olds in the District are enrolled in quality pre-kindergarten (pre-K) programs by 2014. We applaud Chairman Gray for your continued leadership on early childhood education, as evidenced by the passage of this legislation.

We appreciate your willingness to modify the proposed legislation before this Council to address our past concerns, and we recognize that members of the Council believe that the Office of the State Superintendent has not made enough progress toward implementing the 2008 pre-K legislation. As previously shared, we regret that you have not been more fully informed with regard to OSSE's preliminary work in establishing the Early Childhood Advisory Council, because we know that you share our belief that this body can be an instrumental force in accelerating improvements in our early childhood infrastructure.

In addition, DC Action for Children previously expressed concern about establishing a single institution of higher education as the coordinator of the professional development system, particularly with respect to incentive grants. In this regard, we applaud Chairman's effort to accelerate the implementation of a higher education institution. It is a critical component for long-term sustainability of the early childhood education workforce. We hope that the Chairman's efforts will succeed and that interested stakeholders are also able to learn more about the workforce development plan that was submitted on March 15, 2010.

As I have shared previously, DC Action for Children is committed to improvements in communication and partnership with you and your staff. We look forward to seeing early childhood education issues addressed in a manner in which all stakeholders and groups active on early childhood education issue can help inform the broader debate.

Our understanding is that the Executive Branch has reviewed and agreed to work with the legislation, and we look forward to helping in any way.

While we urge OSSE to accelerate the implementation of supports needed among providers, we believe this proposed legislation now before this Council is not the best way to achieve a more comprehensive continuum of early education from birth to college entry.

DC Action for Children is working with critical stakeholders, including funders, business leaders, and providers toward the creation of a citywide system of support to ensure that ALL of the District's children receive the tools and resources necessary to enter and succeed in school and lead a productive life. We plan to focus on improving outcomes for all children from birth to age 8, and their families. We plan to highlight and address critical issues that perpetuate the cycle of poverty for families: in particular, limited access to quality and affordable early care and education programs.

It is our belief that while universal pre-K is a critical program in the continuum of early childhood education, it is only one element of a broader strategy of early learning experiences. We believe that getting the right start in life begins at birth with a wide range of services, including quality childcare, health and nutrition and early literacy. We urge this Council to consider this broader continuum of early learning experiences when crafting policy to promote a comprehensive approach to ensuring that young children are ready to succeed in school.

Our city suffers from a critical shortage of available childcare slots for infants and toddlers with only enough space for about a quarter of children under age two. In low-income communities, such as Wards 5, 7 and 8, the problem is particularly acute. We believe that additional supports for infant and toddler services are desperately needed in the District.

As DC Action for Children embarks on this broader agenda of creating a citywide system of supports, we will focus on creating a broad continuum of early learning experiences of which pre-K is one piece of our broader agenda.

We hope that this proposed legislation ensures continuity of care for young children so that both programs and the workforce can move with young children from infant-toddler care to pre-K classrooms, followed by entry to kindergarten.

We want to ensure that infants and toddlers and the providers caring for them are not excluded from opportunities set forth with this proposed legislation. As you have stated, early learning experiences for infants and toddlers should not be underestimated. Physical, intellectual, and social learning occur in everyday experiences – the interaction between caregivers and infants engaged in the daily rituals of talking, exploring, playing, and cuddling create incredible opportunities for early learning.¹ Early learning experiences can build the intellectual and academic skills necessary to enter school and life ready to learn and engage. That provides a compelling reason to invest in the early learning experiences of infants and toddlers.

Infants and toddlers who do not have quality relationships and early learning experiences fail to develop their full potential. We must provide the caregivers of infants and toddlers with the skills to be nurturing and stable. We must ensure they have upward mobility career opportunities and training.

We are here to support and achieve the goals of the our critically important universal pre-k program, but we raise our concerns of supporting legislation that compromises our broader agenda for a citywide early care and education system, which would include care for infants and toddlers.

In addition, DC Action for Children is working to leverage local public funding by building additional local and national private support to expand this broader continuum of services, including pre-K. We believe having a broader focus will enable us to expand support beyond government funding.

We welcome the opportunity to work in partnership with Chairman Gray, the entire Council and the Fenty Administration, as well as critical stakeholders including business leaders and foundations, to improve early childhood outcomes in the District.

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

¹ ZERO TO THREE, Everyday Ways to Support Your Baby's and Toddler's Early Learning, www.zerotothree.org/schoolreadiness