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Hello, Task Force members. The opportunity to share thoughts with you via a letter vs. a prescribed survey is much appreciated. It offers the opportunity to share thoughts on the present decision cycle's recommendations in a less constrained manner. The format also lets me highlight previous decisions with consequences for the present as well as future decision cycles.

I'd like first, though, to lift up "wins" for the field's advancement toward becoming a recognized professional field of practice. The very fact that 15 prominent national organizations have come together to discuss early childhood education's future as a recognized profession is, in itself, an accomplishment. Being able to label our field of practice as early childhood education (ECE) and practitioners as early childhood educators, without the ever-present footnote outlining the sectors and ages encompassed by the term, represents a milestone. And coming together around a shared set of practice standards (still in development) that the ECE field "owns" versus coexisting standards promulgated by various organizations represents a unifying decision that deserves more recognition.

I might add that a similar "win" may be available given publication of NAEYC's Code of Ethics, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Recognized professions' legal obligations, as well as aspirational aims, are embedded in their codes of ethics. Our forthcoming profession needs a code of ethics, therefore, and it should be a consequential informant to ECE's practice standards.

### ***Keeping Our Eye On the Prize: Children's Early Learning and the Competence of Their Early Childhood Educators***

#### ECE's Chronological Scope as a Professional Field of Practice

While some would argue that the "train has left the station" I want to go on record, yet once again, re my concerns with defining ECE's age scope as birth through age 8, which rest on the fact that doing so limits ECE's potential as a professional field of practice and multiplies the challenges of re-forming ECE as a self-governing field of practice. Given the field-altering work underway, it should never be too late to reflect upon choices and their potential consequences as more "data" becomes available.

I've wondered if confusion may exist between supporting the continuity of children's learning through third grade (and beyond) and an age boundary for ECE as a recognized professional field of practice. The birth through age 8 framework for *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*, the oft-cited rationale for defining ECE's age boundaries in this way, did not result from the Committee's study—i.e., this age frame is not based on research evidence. It was specified in the Committee's charge presented by the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services. As page 20 of the IOM report notes, "This age span is not a discrete developmental period with precise boundaries at its margins; indeed, it falls on a developmental continuum that encompasses individual variations and that begins before birth and continues after age 8 into the rest of childhood, through adolescence and throughout the life course."

I am not alone in believing this field-defining issue needs public vetting. A thorough examination of the challenges and opportunities thrust upon the future profession's aspirations and its re-formation—focused either on birth to the start of kindergarten or on birth through age 8— is overdue.

Re-forming ECE as a birth through age 8 (or to third grade) field of practice will, de facto, position the K-12 system to play an inflated role in determining the ECE profession's standards, desired outcomes, scopes of practice, and accountabilities. The foremost restriction in this regard results from the implausibility of State Boards of Education and state legislators weakening their state's authority over K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade by delegating these grades to the oversight of the ECE profession. Further, K-12 education is unlikely to embrace infant and toddler care as part of its domain, to adopt ECE's developmental orientation (for which numerous citations could be offered), or engage with ECE's emerging professional trajectory.

Consequences of a birth through age 8 chronological boundary are evident already as revealed in the profession's expressed purpose statement and the current cycle's recommended nomenclature and preparation expectations, especially as it relates to whom and where four-year-degrees do and do not apply.

At best, moving forward as presently proposed risks replacing one set of fractures with another. At worst, it can undermine ECE's opportunity to define its purpose, identify its unique contribution to children's early learning and development, and become a self-governing profession—issues that impinge on recommendations presently under consideration as well as those forthcoming.

Importantly, other options exist for promoting continuity of learning through age 8. Resistance to rethinking ECE's chronological scope need not require discarding our commitment to this feature of effective learning. We need only to look to the work of institutional leaders such as New America and the National P-3 Center and their efforts to forge continuity of learning across the Birth – 3<sup>rd</sup> grade continuum.

### Purpose Statement

It's counter-intuitive to resist an iterative review process when spearheading systems change, which is why I am forging ahead with another issue the Task Force may consider "off the table." Neither a code of ethics, preparation standards, scopes of practice, or specialties can cohesively be determined without clarity regarding an aspiring profession's "noble" purpose that articulates its specialized contribution to society's well-being—a purpose that differentiates ECE from allied fields of practice and is accompanied by outcomes for which its members and the profession as a whole are held accountable.

As presented in Decision Cycle 1, ECE's purpose and responsibilities will be "to care for and promote the learning, development, and well-being of children birth through age 8 to establish a foundation for lifelong learning and development" (p.9). While a well-crafted statement, it could as easily be applied to fields such as pediatric medicine and to social workers that engage with young children. When you think about it, it could apply to parents as well.

Given several questions posed under *Reflect*, it's relatively easy to view this cycle's decisions as smoothing out ECE's present challenges and improving upon the status quo. An *inspiring* narrative for ECE's future as a field of practice (with responsibilities that match) has yet to be developed. And if not sensitive to what's emerging from decisions and recommendations to date, its future is increasingly being solidified as one focused on addressing learning and developmental gaps associated with a sub-population of children versus promoting the learning and development of all children, even those whose early learning environments have afforded them opportunities for succeeding in school and beyond without external intervention. Increasingly, ECE is being defined as a targeted vs. universal profession.

### Roles, Scopes of Practice, and Preparation

As this cycle's draft highlights, a large number of professions limit themselves to a single member designation, a choice reflecting not only the nature of the profession's specialized competencies and related professions' scopes or practice, but also the importance of clarity regarding the signature competencies required by the profession in question. This approach makes it clear to the public that individuals identified as licensed members have successfully completed the profession's requisite preparation and demonstrated the obligatory skills. This approach also favors simplicity, facilitating consistency in evidence-based practices across sites and reducing a profession's systemic complexities.

This said, physical therapy and occupational therapy are two prominent professions that include two designations: the therapist and the assistant therapist (terminology such as "lead therapist" would be considered redundant). Tied to different scopes of practice and preparation standards, these roles are not considered levels, as ECE typically uses this term or as implied by the labels "Educator I, Educator II, and Educator III and their justifications"<sup>1</sup>. Rather, they are recognized as distinctive roles, each contributing in distinct ways to a client's improved health and functioning; each exercising responsibility for advancing the profession's "noble purpose"; and each accountable for the results of her/his actions. Importantly, each role is capable of bringing professional judgment and decision-making to bear in the face of uncertainty. Semantically, their titles are sufficiently descriptive to inform clients about their differentiated responsibilities.

Members of professions have individual, as well as collective responsibilities, directly attached to the profession's public accountability, such as those outlined for future early childhood educators on page 9. Preparation ensures each individual is prepared to accommodate the complexities of professional practice. This is why, as defined by their job descriptions, paralegals and certified nursing assistants are not in the legal and nursing professions respectively. This is why Educator I should not be included as a designated role in the ECE profession. Across these three examples, responsibilities are primarily technical in nature.

The distinctions being made here matter because they speak to a profession's credibility and ensure the profession's protected title(s) are not diluted by inclusion of roles that only minimally rely on the profession's expertise. In question, then, is what minimally should be required for recognition as a competent early childhood educator—not one in-the-making? And, based on the competencies need by the ECE profession as a field of practice, how many

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the three roles' proposed labels do not even reflect Decision Cycle 1's recommended terminology in this regard, e.g., Early Childhood Educator 1, Early Childhood Educator 2, etc.

differentiated roles are necessary? Has the cart inadvertently been placed before the horse in this regard?

Including anyone in the ECE profession who is not fully prepared for their responsibilities not only refutes ECE as a profession, it undermines its ethical obligations to children's learning and development. It also sustains the field's status quo and prioritizes growth tactics like career ladders, thereby maintaining an open entry system as the profession's end goal, vs. as part of a series of options for transitioning ECE from where it presently is to where it wants to go.

Additionally, distinctions between Educator II and Educator III clearly are driven by program sponsorship. This suggests, as noted above, that K-12 requirements are determining what early childhood educators need to know and be able to do as determined by the public school's governance structure—not by our profession. That's a slam to children and to early childhood educators in light of what we know about effective early childhood education pedagogy. Further, it perpetuates the status quo for early childhood education as a field of practice and confuses the public—not unlike the public confusion nurses have spent decades trying to overcome following a decision they consider one of their worse<sup>2</sup>, which allowed both 2-year and 4-year preparation degrees to become licensed nurses (the description of this on page 43 misrepresents the facts, I might add).

So yes, having these three “levels” could easily tamp down the possibility of securing increased compensation for early childhood educators because we won't have elevated our specialized expertise and acknowledged what is required to learn it. More importantly, it tamps down the competence of early childhood educators by suggesting that the early learning setting establishes the level of preparation required versus the minimum level of preparation required for competent practice. Entering the public arena with two sets of preparation standards for the same role with the same responsibilities, one of which falls below expectations set by state governments, may be a first.

The nomenclature is also confusing because Educator I, II, and III can too easily be superimposed on roles currently found in ECE center-based settings: teacher, assistant teacher, and teacher aide, an assumption further guided by their alignment with credentials and degrees typically associated with these three roles—which for Educator III is routed for the public schools. Further, unclear is where in the proposed matrix family childcare providers, center administrators with pedagogical responsibilities, and higher education faculty with clinical responsibilities reside (See Decision Cycle 1).

Diving still deeper, and this is where language can get tricky, I'm wondering if what should be driving the field's roles, practice standards, and preparation systems—i.e., designing a profession with the competencies and moral commitment to “improve outcomes for children” (yet to be specified)—is missing the distinction between a profession's purpose and the foundational tenets undergirding its fulfillment. Excluding a role involving primarily technical responsibilities does not preclude the presence of pathways to roles associated

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<sup>2</sup> Goffin, S. G. (2009). *Field-Wide Leadership: Insights from Five Fields of Practice*. Washington, DC: Goffin Strategy Group.

with greater responsibilities nor does it lessen the profession's responsibility for actively pursuing diversity, inclusivity, and commitment to racial and social justice. Inferring, however, that ECE can't advance equity and social justice unless a role with fewer preparation demands is included is a questionable assumption. In response to the fifth question under *Reflect*, therefore, and given justifications revolving almost exclusively around equity, inclusion, and social justice (pgs. 12-13), the proposed structure conveys disrespect for the abilities of those we want as part of the ECE profession and for the children who are entrusted to our care.

### Bringing These Thoughts to a Close

We're asked to "be mindful of the balance" re the delicate relationship between "the present as it is and the one being built for the future" (p.3.) and reminded of the incredible efforts of our predecessors and colleagues. With all due respect to the political sentiments underlying this statement, this initiative is about *ECE seizing its power to define its future*.

Decision Cycles 3, 4, and 5 are more suggestive of an implementation plan than an aspiration for ECE's future. Ultimately, re-forming ECE as a recognized profession is an aspirational endeavor. A clear aspiration is essential to fueling the challenging work ahead. How willing are you, therefore, to revisit assumptions and choices that brought ECE to its present status and are out-of-step with what is now known about children's early learning and development? How willing are you to imagine future possibilities not presently imaginable for the present and to step out of "alignment" (p. 4) to help us envision a groundbreaking future for ECE?

Your legacy will hopefully be a durable framework for envisioning ECE's first and future iterations as a profession. I know of no profession that is satisfied with its status quo. I know of no profession that attempted to figure everything out from the get go, much less in two years.

We have embarked on a developmental journey crowded with uncertainties. I've extensively studied professions as a systemic structure for fields of practice; I've examined seven professions in depth and acquired familiarity with many others. Each has evolved and continues to evolve toward closer approximations of what is demanded of professions. Yet they've never taken their eyes off the prize: their unique public obligation to those their specialized knowledge and skills serve and gaining the competence, governance skills, and traction necessary to bring their ambitions to fruition.