CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL

Marjorie C. Decker
City Councilor

October 13, 2011

D. Margaret Drury
City Clerk
City Hall
Cambridge, MA 02139

Dear Margaret:

Please include the enclosed Mayor's Blue Ribbon Commission's final report on *Early Childhood Education and Care* and a copy of the *Summary of Information Gathered through the Focus Group* as part of the record for the upcoming meeting on Monday, October 17, 2011 under the heading of Communications and Reports for City Officers.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Marjorie C. Decker
City Councillor

enclosure

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Report of the Mayor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Early Childhood Education and Care

Co-Chairs City Councilor Marjorie Decker and

School Committee Vice-Chair Marc McGovern

October 17, 2011

Commission Members

Betty Bardige, Cambridge Community Foundation
Jen Baily, Agenda for Children Literacy Initiative
Lei-Anne Ellis- DHSP Childcare and Family Support Division
Randi Epstein- Cambridge Child Care Resource Center
Michelle Godfrey-Center for Families, Director
Lynn Hall-CPS Early Childhood Connections Project Leader
Claire Koen-CPS Family Liaison
Daryl Mark-Cambridge Public Library Coordinator of Youth Service
David Maher, Mayor
Rich Rossi – Deputy City Manager
Ellen Semonoff – Assistant City Manager DHSP
Ellen Wolpert –Community Partnerships for Children, Coordinator
Jeffrey Young – CPS Superintendent

Mayor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Early Childhood Education and Care

Purpose

Mayer David Maher appointed Councilor Marjorie Decker and School Committee Vice-Chair Marc McGovern as Co-Chairs of the Blue Ribbon Commission on Early Education and Care in 2010. They recruited approximately 15 early care and education providers, specialists and community members to serve on this commission. The Commission was charged to answer the following question: What would the City of Cambridge do if early childhood care and education were one of our top priorities as a community?

The Commission based its work on the research which supports the critical importance of early childhood programming. The research from diverse fields of study shows how critical the first three years of life are in determining a child's development and ability to thrive in school. The research also demonstrates that early childhood support has a much broader economic impact. For every dollar spent on early childhood programs, society saves from to $7-11 in funding for ineffective remedial programs according to James J. Heckman, Nobel Lauriat for Economics. Supporting early education programs also maximizes the skills today's children will bring to tomorrow's workforce.[i]

"What happens during the first months and years of life matters a lot,
not only because this period of development provides an indelible blueprint for adult well-being,
but because it sets either a sturdy or fragile stage for what follows".[ii]

Early Education Programs in Cambridge

Cambridge has 51 preschool programs serving approximately 2,300 children, including 160 infants and 476 toddlers. There are 42 independent family childcare educators/providers serving approximately 270 children and four family childcare educators/providers who are part of the Catholic Charities system serving 32 children. The Center for Families has identified 19 Family Friend and Neighbor educators/providers and the Childcare Resource Center has identified 15 informal Childcare providers who are currently caring for families who are receiving EEC financial support. There are 11 programs receiving Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) contracted subsidies and 4 accepting vouchers. Nine of the Cambridge programs offer families financial assistance through their own sliding fee scales. Of the independent family educators/providers, one accepts vouchers. Among the 51 preschool programs there are (some are in more than 1 category): five Special Start inclusion programs and one Montessori program run by Cambridge Public Schools; six additional preschools located within six public schools run by the Cambridge Department of Human Services; four Head Start programs; nine parent coops; three religious programs (Muslim, Jewish, African Methodist Episcopal); eight university-affiliated programs (Harvard and MIT); 13 programs affiliated with large agencies such as YMCA, Associated EEC, East End House, Catholic Charities, Bright Horizons, Salvation Army (which serves homeless families); and 11 private independent programs with no affiliations.

Many of the Cambridge programs serve children from outside Cambridge because their parents work in Cambridge or select that particular program and many Cambridge children are served in programs in other communities based on their parents' child care preferences or workplaces. Approximately 60% of Cambridge 3 and 4 years are in pre-school or junior kindergarten programs. Many Cambridge children 0-4 are served by family childcare educators/providers and many are served in the informal care environment by family or friends. There are long waitlists for many programs and the need for more state subsidized slots is great. Unfortunately, the waitlist for such slots is very long.

Assessing Early Childhood Needs in Cambridge

The Blue Ribbon Commission reached out to a number of important stakeholders to hear what those most affected by the early childhood care environment saw as the critical issues. Information was solicited from Cambridge pediatricians about what they saw as important issues for the City around early childhood education. The co-chairs engaged with and solicited parent input through surveys distributed at Cambridge Family Literacy Day as well as through childcare centers. The co-chairs held focus groups with parents, and family and center based program providers. The Commission also solicited ideas from pediatrians across the City The Commission also met with two nationally recognized experts in the field of early childhood education and with experts in the field of children's behavioral and mental health services who provided input on the needs surrounding those issues. Also, the 0-8 Council, which is the local governing council for all early childhood grants—40 members strong—were asked to contribute their input at yet another meeting. . The Commission developed a summary of all of the input from all of the stakeholders, which is attached to this report. From the data and the work with both city and outside early childhood experts, the Commission has identified some key problems and projects which if addressed would show that the City of Cambridge prioritizes early care and education.

Research

Research in social and cognitive neuroscience unequivocally shows that what happens between the ages of zero to three sets the stage for all future learning and development. Social science tells us that the parent-child relationship is key to healthy childhood development. This very first relationship sets the stage for a child's feelings of trust, security, and love. Research also indicates that the amount and content of language a child grows up with is a crucial factor for school success. Language plays a central role in children's image of themselves as learners. Proscriptions and discouragement have a negative effect, whereas affirmations, questions and the use of complex sentences have a positive effect. Parents living in poverty tend to take care of their children's basic needs and let them develop independently–there is often less reading, a more authoritarian parenting style, and less conversation and use of rich language with children. In contrast, middle-class parents tend more often to cultivate their children's talents, seek out their children's opinions, teach their children to advocate for themselves, and use reasoning to negotiate conflicts.

Children who develop strong communication skills in their early years have an ongoing and increasing edge. They are more likely to develop the rich vocabulary, skill at telling stories and asking interesting

questions, and ability to use words to reason through problems and negotiate conflicts that prime them for success in school and throughout life. Importantly, it is not social class or race or language or parents level of education that makes the difference. It's what parents, teachers, and other adults do to engage children in language-building conversation. A range of early childhood interventions – including high quality child care, home visiting and parent education, book-sharing programs, and family literacy programs, have narrowed or prevented the "achievement gap" between children from poor and more affluent families.

In addition to the important role that exposure to language plays in a child's development, the amount of stress a child experiences can also significantly impact a child's development and ability to learn. A high level of chronic stress, known as toxic stress, is a significant factor in multiple diseases and mental illnesses in adults. Families living in poverty are at an increased risk of toxic stressors, which negatively impact children's brain architecture, chemistry and function, including memory and learning. Such high levels of stress also increase the risk of physical and mental illnesses throughout the lifespan. Childhood toxic stress results in an increased risk of a dysfunctional stress response, thereby increasing reactivity to lower thresholds of adverse experiences. For children, a critical factor in developing a healthy stress response system is a positive relationship with the primary attachment figure. Research also indicates that a supportive and nurturing adult, such as an early childcare provider, parent, or grandparent, can buffer children against these detrimental stressors that hinder brain development (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005).

Researchers have identified five "protective factors" that help to prevent child abuse, strengthen families' ability to buffer potentially toxic stress, and foster healthy child development. These are:

- Parental resilience: the adults' ability to bounce back from stress
- Having basic needs met promptly and access to help in a crisis
- A social network that can support the family
- Parents' knowledge of child development and expectable behavior
- The child's social-emotional development and ability to express needs with words or in other appropriate ways

Child care and home visiting programs, family support services, and community efforts that intentionally build these protective factors can mitigate risks that many young children might otherwise face. (Center for the Study of Social Policy).

The co-chairs of the Blue Ribbon Commission had several meetings with both the City Manager and representatives from his office, as well as with the Superintendent of Schools. These meetings resulted in the following commitments.

Commitments from the City of Cambridge

- Based on the recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission, the City Manager will propose to the City Council the funding of mental health supports to city and community run pre-schools as well as to family child care educators/providers. This fundingwill assist programs in supporting children with challenging behaviors, improving children's ability to function in school-like settings. This funding will support consultation to family childcare educators/providers as well as to center based programs. This will ensure that critical services will be available in more of the places where children, who have not previously had such access, are being served.

- The Department of Human Service Programs will develop and implement a literacy based workshop series for family childcare educators/providers on developing children's early literacy skills. The workshops will be based on the work of Kathy Modigliani of the Family Childcare Project. The Agenda for Children Literacy Initiative and other members of the 0-8 Council will work with family childcare educators/providers to develop the workshops. This will be done in collaboration with the Cambridge Public Library.

- The Department of Human Service Programs will provide two additional drop-in playgroups to serve family and informal care providers in city-owned buildings.

- The City will work with the local business community to support Provider Appreciation Day by hosting a reception to recognize the important work of the city's early childhood educators/providers.

Commitments from the School Department

- To fund a pre-school to Kindergarten transition pilot project. The goal is to build relationships between the Department of Human Services preschools and public school kindergarten teachers to ease transitions for children and their families and make sure children enter CPS with the requisite skills, concepts and attitudes that will ensure success in school.

- Include representatives from the 0-8 Council in discussions regarding the Family Resource Center and the possible creation of "one stop shopping" for parents in order to improve the connection between early childhood education programs and the public schools, including centralized information regarding early childhood education options.

- Involvement of the early childhood community in planning a pilot "wrap-around" district.

- Linkage of data systems so that children can be followed from birth into school and early childhood programs and community efforts can be more meaningfully evaluated

Although a great deal was accomplished by this work and both the City and School Department have made considerable commitments, there is still work to be done with not only the City and Schools, but with local businesses and universities.

Next Steps

- Continue to work with the City to explore the possibility for individual childcare educators/providers to join a group health insurance plan. This could potentially significantly decrease their current health insurance costs.

- Continue to work with City Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department and pre-schools to arrange for short term drop off and pick up parking areas to allow parents to go in to drop off and pick up very young children without getting ticketed. A pilot site is already underway.

- Work with the School Department to provide space for early childhood programming in each elementary school.

- Ensure that the School Department continues to support the expansion of early childhood programming, including both home-based and school based services.

- Work with local businesses to help fund a public awareness campaign that promotes the importance of early childhood learning experiences: Let' Talk . . . it makes a difference!® and Born to Learn (brain development). With funding from the business community and leadership from city officials, a focused public awareness campaign could mobilize the community to recognize and support early childhood learning.

- Work with local businesses to provide space and funding for staff and materials for early childhood wintertime "playgroups" in local offices located near public transportation. These playgroups would promote children's physical and social development as well as break the isolation caregivers often feel during this time. .

- Work with local businesses to "adopt" a family childcare provider program. This could include buying books and educational materials that would enrich the homes in which children receive care and education (infant, toddler and preschoolers).

- Professional development provided to early childcare educators/providers to share expectations and standards for children entering kindergarten and to promote ability of educators/providers to support parents in kindergarten registration process.

- Shared professional development with kindergarten staff to build relationships across systems to support children transitioning from early childhood programs to kindergarten.

- Continue to work with Lesley University in developing more support and training for family childcare educators/providers. Additionally, explore opportunities for the early childhood educator/provider community to work with student interns.

- Work with universities to provide free consultation to early childhood care and education programs. Consultation provided would be in the area of expertise of the professor or lecturer. This could range from administration of programs, evaluation, leadership,or to implementing a particular curriculum such as Reggio Emilia.

- Continue to work with Harvard Graduate School of Education in exploring and developing strategies to transform and elevate the importance of early childhood education in our community.

- Continue to work with the City to explore ways of directing community benefits as a result of development into the early childhood education community.

- Recommend that some form of this Commission continue to meet on a regular basis to continue strategizing how to better support early childhood education.

Summary

The Blue Ribbon Commission on Early Childhood Education and Care, co-chaired by City Councilor, Marjorie Decker and School Committee Vice-Chair, Marc McGovern, was formed in 2010. The mission of this commission was to evaluate early childcare programs in Cambridge and answer the question: *"What would the City of Cambridge do if early childhood care and education were one of our top priorities as a community?"*

In addition to the co-chairs, the commission members included:
David Maher, Mayor
Marc McGovern – Cambridge School Committee
Rich Rossi – Assistant City Manager
Ellen Semonoff – Department of Human Services
Claire Koen – Family Liaison, Cambridge Public Schools
Lynn Hall – CPS Early Childhood Connections Project Leader
Daryl Mark – Cambridge Public Library Coordinator of Youth Services
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Betty Bardige – Cambridge Community Foundation
Lei-Ann Ellis – DHSP Childcare and Family Support Division

[i] National Institute for Early Education Research. *Preschool matters: Public investment in early care and education is an efficient way to strengthen our future workforce.* November/December 2007 Volume 5, No. 5.

[ii] Shonkoff, J. and D. Phillips, Editors. (2000) *From neurons to neighborhoods.* National Academy Press. Washington, D.C. p. 5