



NATIONAL
EQUITY
PROJECT

Deliver on the promise
of a quality education

**Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative
Institutional Partners
Child Care Providers**

Listening Campaign
Summary of Findings
(rev. January, 2013)

November, 2012

Presented to:

Carol Burnett
Executive Director
MLICCI

Summary of Findings

Overview

Upon the invitation of the Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative, four senior staff of the National Equity Project conducted individual and small group interviews in Jackson, Mississippi on October 22 and 23rd, 2012. Approximately 45 people were asked a series of open-ended questions intended to elicit the participants' experiences, ideas, concerns, and hopes about the Early Child Care and Learning system and work throughout the state. Participants' responses were transcribed.

Listening Campaign Focus Questions:

1. How long have you lived and/or worked in Mississippi and what has it been like for you to do your work here?
2. What are you trying to accomplish in *your* work in the early learning/childcare community? What does "victory" look like?
3. What do you believe are the greatest strengths and assets in the work to create quality in and increase access to early childhood education in the state?
4. What are the primary challenges or threats to accomplishing your goals/shared goals for early childhood education in Mississippi?
5. How have you been working on those issues? Who have you been working on them with? What kind of success have you been able to achieve?
6. What are the opportunities that exist now to advance the work that you feel are promising?

Data Analysis

The transcripts of the interviews conducted during the Listening Campaign were reviewed to seek and surface patterns in participants' responses that would later be placed into categories based on themes. The following themes emerged and we have organized this report by themes – along with some corresponding quotes from various participants in the interviews and focus conversations.

Categories of Responses | Themes:

- **Strategic Direction/ Infrastructure to Support Early Care and Learning throughout the State**
- **Trust and Relationships – Past and Present**
- **Collaboration and Professional Development/Support**
- **Thoughts/ideas about the access, quality and moving forward together**

Strategic Direction/ Infrastructure to Support Early Care and Learning throughout the State

The responses selected for this category indicate a range of participant statements about their perceptions, ideas, and attitudes concerning the direction, focus, and vision for Early Child Care and Learning in the state of Mississippi. Some statements also indicate the way respondents feel about the institutional players' ability to decide, execute, and implement policies or practices aligned to needs of providers throughout the state. The responses that have been selected in this report intend to reveal the range and richness of the data gathered during the Listening Campaign and in no way intended to suggest an assessment or judgment of the respondents' intentions or meaning.

- Frustrating because of a lack of resources in the state.
- At the State level, we have a number of passionate advocates. We have knowledge of early learning here. The down side of all that passion is that we have a hard time working together.
- There has not been much progress over the last 23 years – the big picture is still the same.
- Legislators need to get it and understand what their role is. Elected officials should ask the legislature for more money to cover the program cost for more children.
- A blue print already exists for a quality Early Learning System for all children. The price tag killed it.
- There are always barriers to this work because we know it requires money.
- Pushing the field forward has made providers uncomfortable because of some necessary changes (i.e. use of technology)

- Our job at the state level is to always ask, “Is this good for children?”
- Have made some progress at getting children off the waiting list – still a ways to go.
- We do not have trustworthy data that supports the truth about attendance in centers – makes it hard to make policy decisions.
- Lack of money continues to mean we are ‘piece-mealing’ a system together. Makes it hard to get groups to be on the same page.
- People don’t always understand the logistics of how possible some of their ideas are – there is so much bureaucratic red-tape to go through.
- We have a lot of areas to grow in and in some ways have the means to get there – we just have to be patient.
- We have built a new industry at Mississippi State. Stop having a monopoly on who is administering it and open it up to other universities.
- The State taking over Early Care has to be done for the good of the children – not for money to be made by any corporation or others.
- The STAR rating is tied to structural inequity in the subsidy. It is playing a game of gotcha! Not interested in strengthening the programs.
- There is so much bias and conflict of interest in the system.
- They don’t want to see if your approach works – they just want you to use theirs.
- It is more or less working with fear all the time and not even able to work with your children. Some days you don’t even want to go to your own business. People fought for us to vote and get an education . . . it is close to slavery. They make it appear that they are doing things with the intention of doing nothing.
- We have good people that we cannot afford to pay enough to stay in their jobs in centers.
- We have children on our list who haven’t been in the center for a year. Its like being set up for fraud. I have asked that they get removed from the ledger. There is a request for change. They have one person to respond to emails.
- The state seems very impersonal. It’s like they are not really there to help you. We have already done everything they have asked us to do. Now we get treated like criminals.
- We need a seamless approach to early learning – connected to kindergarten.

- If we want to change the narrative in Mississippi, this state must invest in children beginning with pre-natal.
- A challenge to success is the process. Childcare providers are not brought to the table. How do we find common ground around everyone's agenda?
- Race is a major factor in how policy is passed and applied.
- Some providers have room for more kids – yet there are thousands on a waiting list.
- We want quality affordable childcare for all children regardless of zip code.
- We need a data system that helps families get care.
- The biggest challenge is the disconnect between those working on the state level and childcare providers on the ground.
- A strength is that we have the brainpower in this state to do it right. But we are not on the same page as to how to do it.
- One of the greatest challenges in retaining your staff is the credential program. Once you send teachers to a (training) program they turn around and open a center. They go to the (training) program on our name, didn't have to pay and no commitment required for them to stay. No benefit to for us.
- Success to me would look like childcare would not be seen as baby-sitting.

Trust and Relationships – Past and Present

These responses focused on evidence of the quality and types of interactions and relationships between and among various state employees, universities, programs, providers, etc. These responses attempt to capture the perceptions of the type of relationships people are currently experiencing or the type of relationships experienced in the past. The responses that have been selected in this report intend to reveal the range and richness of the data gathered during the Listening Campaign and in no way intended to suggest an assessment or judgment of the respondents' intentions or meaning.

- There are long-standing battles – but I don't know about all of them.
- It has been hard to get parents and providers to move together and stay engaged.
- Message sent does not always equal message received.
- Kellogg Learning Labs was the best thing we had to bring us together to the table and flesh out some stuff that was going on in the State and talk about how we can put our resources together.
- Money, different viewpoints, what is quality, ways to evaluate quality – these have divided us.
- Do not understand how/why Mississippi State became the driver of the quality process.
- Most of our centers' staff comes to work every day, work for next to nothing, are intelligent and caring. Some are degreed in education and social work. Many of them have been insulted and disrespected in this process.
- We were sent a mentor to provide technical assistance. She didn't do anything but sit at a computer.
- My problem with all these programs is that you send in 15 people to all do the same thing. Why are we paying people to do the same thing? They get grants, we do not.
- It's as if we do not count – there is no respect for child care providers.
- There is racial bias on the part of the center visitors – we don't know how the standards are weighted.
- I lost money by participating in the program – I can take the five-star concept and do it myself.
- I feel like I have not been trained or told about how DHS is doing things – puts a lot of pressure on us as providers.

- We are in a lot of confusion right now. Things change so quickly. Feels like we are out there on our own.
- We have policy issues because we are still a segregated community – policy does not consider that black children are the ones that really need help.
- I think the quality rating system is working against the vision of care providers feeling good about their work.
- I think racism is getting in the way of success. A lot of centers going out of business are black-owned.
- They have a bias – they don't think we know how to manage money so they give us lots of stuff. But not the stuff we need – random equipment.
- There is so much stuff that is just interference. You still have to concentrate on educating kids. Makes you wonder if you should keep it up. I think that might be the intent – to stress us to the point that we give up.
- A strength would be to recognize us as educators. We are educated people – don't treat us as babysitters.
- The minute we open our doors, we face an enormous block. I heard a statement that there are no quality childcare centers for black kids. We are not seen as quality. We start with the cards stacked against us and we serve people who need help.
- People making the rules don't have a clue about poor and low-income children and what they need to have in order to learn.
- I hear statements that black people are misusing the funds for childcare.

Collaboration and Professional Development/Support

The responses selected for this category indicate a range of participant statements about their perceptions, ideas, and attitudes concerning collaborating, cooperating, and working together toward common goals. Responses referencing ideas about the type of support necessary are also included. The responses that have been selected in this report intend to reveal the range and richness of the data gathered during the Listening Campaign. The following responses are in no way intended to suggest an assessment or judgment of the respondents' intentions or meaning.

- I want to facilitate a dialogue. We need to have a uniform program at the Department of Education or somewhere.
- SECAC can be a tremendous advocate if we work together.
- We have an opportunity to take the fight to the community level and engage others to care about these issues - get them to vote for people that have their values and interests at heart.
- We need to continue to educate parents about quality care – how to get it and what to look for.
- How can institutions of higher learning become more invested in what's going on?
- We need good training – not more stuff or junk.
- People need education and training to conduct a site visit – not like the FBI. We should be partners. We need to respect each other's intelligence.
- We need a more diverse group to do the visits – from other educational backgrounds, understanding of culture, more sensitivity. Need to not judge based on your preconceived notions.
- We need less fragmentation and more communication among all the players. Licensing, standards, -- they do not know what each other's rules and regulations are.
- There is both a lack of training and over-training – confusing the providers. There needs to be training provided for folks who come in to observe and evaluate the centers. They need inter-personal skills.
- We have to make sure our staff have the training they need.
- There are ways to do this together – we have good ideas – listen and pilot some and see the results.
- We have developed relationships with fellow centers (not a competitive thing) – we keep each other informed.

- We see research as drawing out stories that need to be told.
- Everyone should work together for early childhood and look at what each child needs and produce programs and policies that help them. There is a problem and we need to resolve it.
- We need to build on partnerships and collaborations that have worked and are a strength.
- We need facilitation to come back together and get to a common goal.

Thoughts/ideas about the access, quality and moving forward together

The responses selected for this category indicate a range of participant perceptions and ideas, about issues related to quality and access. Participants' ideas about moving forward together are also captured and highlighted by statements in this category. The following responses intend to reveal the range and richness of the data gathered during the Listening Campaign and in no way intended to suggest an assessment or judgment of the respondents' intentions or meaning.

- SECAC is a diverse group of folks that can be used as a powerful tool – if we can say the same thing with the same voice in the legislature and in the grocery store.
- It is important that people at the local level are at the state table for decisions and input.
- Providers need to step up on the quality side –but need the resources to be able to do that.
- Quality promoters need to understand where the floor needs to shore up. Policy makers need to see this as an investment that will pay off.
- The big picture issue of 8,000 children still on a waiting list cannot be lost.
- There is hope and opportunity that we can overlap the quality promoters desire to improve quality and outcomes for kids and try to grow that into some common ground.
- There is some common ground – willingness to have those hard conversations and think through next steps together.
- We do this work for love, not money.
- There are not enough stars to show what we really do!
- Need to invest more money into child care funding – then you will see quality go up.
- If you want to make a difference, start in the lives of children.
- Most people do not have the money to be the star that your heart burns for. They don't think you have enough sense to do the right thing.
- I want to do this the rest of my life. I don't want to wake up and not be able to have my business anymore.
- In naming quality . . . we cannot lose site of what providers already do for families so no one thing is deemed higher than the other. You have a sense of quality before someone else defines it for you.

- When are we going to get to the point where it is worth it for us to own childcare as a business? There are costs associated with doing this well. If you have a heart, you are not going to turn away a child in need.
- Providers get up at 3:00 and 4:00am. They are tired – just trying to keep the doors open. 95% of the time people are struggling just to sustain.
- My passion is Mississippi. I choose to live here.
- It would stabilize me to have a lead teacher for every age group – someone who could float from one area to another. As a director, I have to wear so many hats (director, janitor, cook, etc.)
- There should not be a racial divide with access and resources.
- Quality issues are important – we just need the funding to make it happen. We want to be better.
- We are at a tipping point of coming together but it could go either way (positive or negative direction). We are closer to bringing everyone together than ever before.
- Childcare in MS is viewed as an entitlement by legislators, not as a pathway to employment. Education is economic development, not welfare. We have to shift our thinking so that childcare is viewed as a pathway to economic development.

Report Summary Analysis

Strategic Direction/Infrastructure to Support Early Care and Learning throughout the State

Everyone we talked to spoke about the need to create a system that is for the good of the children. **People from all parts of the early childhood system have strong dedication to serving children and everyone talked about wanting a system that serves all.** That said, there is no common strategic direction or agreement on how to best serve children. One of the biggest challenges many reported is the disconnect between those working on the state level and childcare providers on the ground in terms of beliefs in how best to serve children. Although there is a challenge in coming to agreement about how to best serve children, there seems to be widespread knowledge about what a quality early learning system ought to be and agreement about what it means to have quality care. Those we spoke with said Mississippians working in early care have the brainpower to “do it right.”

The belief about why Mississippi is not providing early care for all children is different depending on where one is located in the system. Providers point to the state as the problem; the state points to providers as the problem; etc. For example, depending on who we spoke to, the Star rating system is seen either as a benefit to serving children or a barrier. Although no one we spoke with disagreed with having a rating system that helped promote quality care, there was large disagreement about whether or not the current rating system is working. Some reported that the current rating system is producing problems for providers rather than helping them improve quality. Others said that the rating system seems to benefit some providers over others and that the awarding of stars is subjective. There seems to be variance in how stars are awarded – some providers report receiving a fair evaluation while others believe they are unfairly judged and assessed by those in power to rate a center.

The structure of the early care system was also mentioned to be producing results that make it difficult for all children to get into early learning programs. Providers are finding it difficult to recruit and retain quality teachers. Many of the providers we spoke with reported that they have many open slots in their center (some are only at 50% capacity) largely because they can only afford to accept families that can pay for services thus leaving low income families on a waiting list for financial assistance. The irony mentioned to us many times in interviews is that there are empty slots throughout the early care system and a substantial waiting list of children waiting to be served. Some said that the waiting list is so long and the system is so slow to move children off the list that many low-income children will turn kindergarten age before getting into an early care program and therefore begin their education already behind. Everyone we spoke with agreed that children should not have to be on a waiting list, but again, it seems as though there are vast differences in what to do about it.

Finally, although everyone we spoke to throughout the system agreed that providers need support to continually improve the quality of service, the type of support given to providers is not always the type of support they need. In addition, several people mentioned unintended consequences are resulting from improving quality by credentialing child care workers. One example is the loss a center experiences when paying for staff to be trained. A center spends

funds to get their staff trained and credentialed and once their staff have the credential they are able to draw higher pay at another center or open up one of their own. The center that paid for the credentialing is out funds and loses qualified staff. This outcome might not be what policy makers had in mind when requiring credentialing but nonetheless it is an outcome. Most likely there are other unintended consequences of policies that ought to be explored.

Trust and Relationships – Past and Present

The people we spoke with believe that deep divisions exist between various groups focused on early childhood, that “camps” have been formed and sides taken on how to best serve children. Low trust between providers, early childhood funders, organizations focused on improving quality, and state leaders was mentioned by almost every individual or group. Participants mentioned that people have been divided from working well together due to different beliefs about what/how to fund early childhood programs, different viewpoints on best practices in teaching pre-school children, different beliefs about what quality care is, and differences in how providers are evaluated for quality. Although some participants reported that some things were better in the past, without exception everyone we interviewed said that there has never been a time when all the stakeholders in early childhood education were working well together.

Some participants talked about how race is still at the root of relationship problems. We heard people say there is racial bias in the evaluation process and a racialized outcome in terms of which providers are succeeding and which ones are not as evidenced by many of the centers going out of business are black-owned. It was also widely reported that one of the ways racial bias shows up/manifests is that instead of giving funds for providers to use in the best way they believe they are given “lots of stuff” (equipment) that is not what they need the most. Providers related this practice to a lack of trust by the funders and this lack of trust is about not trusting black people to know what to do with funds. **Many providers stated that they have heard leaders say there are no quality childcare centers for black kids, and since they are the ones providing services to black kids, these statements leave them feeling as though they are seen as low quality.** Some wonder if there is an intention by the powers that be to make things so hard that they will give up, yet another indicator of low trust and strained relationships. Across the board, people from one part of the system spoke about how others are not working in the best interest of the children and instead have their own agendas to promote.

We also heard that there is a lack of confidence in the current delivery of early education across the state, a sentiment that came from people from all parts of the system. In addition, many participants spoke about the need for equity, but again, when it came to ideas on how to increase quality and equity, there was great disparity in beliefs about how to achieve it. For example, some systems leaders saw the implementation of a quality rating system and professional development requirements as solutions to the quality and equity problem.

Collaboration and Professional Development/Support

Without exception, everyone we spoke with shared this sentiment, “If we can work together, we can be powerful to produce a structure and programs to provide quality services to children. There have been times when this has happened in the past, need to look at how partnerships worked in the past and build on that.” There seems to be widespread recognition that dialogue between people from all parts of the early care system needs to happen and, due to the mistrust mentioned above, this dialogue will need to be facilitated so that relationships can be built that will enable everyone to reach agreement on common goals and actions to take to reach those goals.

There was also widespread agreement on the need for good training and professional development. It seems however that whenever people spoke about professional development and support to improve quality they ended up talking about the rating system. Some reported that those who are conducting site visits to rate providers need to be more culturally competent, better able to understand various cultures. As one participant stated, “those who observe and evaluate centers need more training so that their bias about providers serving poor children is checked.” **The connections between professional development, support and the rating system seem to indicate a tension in that providers feel professional development is more aimed at rating their service than increasing quality.**

In addition, several people we spoke with said that providers need to step up on quality, that they need to increase quality, but they need the resources to do so. Those that are promoting quality need to understand what needs to be improved and policy makers need to see improvement as an investment that will pay off for serving children.

Thoughts/Ideas about the Access, Quality and Moving Forward Together

Common with all participants were statements about improving the system so that all children have access to quality early care. Everyone we spoke with mentioned the very large waiting list, some saying there were 8,000 children on the list, others saying 17,000, and all agreeing this list needs to be addressed. Others focused on a racial divide in terms of access saying “there should not be a racial divide with access and resources.”

Quality seems to be of concern to all participants but attaining it is a challenge. Many of the providers we spoke with agreed that they need to improve quality and that they needed the resources to do so. As one provider put it, “most people do not have the money to be the star that your heart burns for.” For many, quality is connected to funding and if more investment is made in early care, quality will increase.

Many people spoke about the need to move forward together in order to tackle the challenges in the early care system. Some believe it would be powerful to have a common message that is “the same at the legislature as it is in the grocery store.” SECAC was mentioned as a possible tool to gather people together to create this common message and voice. We also heard that it is important for people at the local level to be at the state table for input and decisions about where to go next. Some said there is enough common ground and a willingness to have the

necessary hard conversations that could bring agreement on next steps. Many we spoke with said that everyone is doing this work for love not money, and that if the system is going to work for children, we'll have to move forward together. As one participant put it, "we are at a tipping point of coming together but it could go either way (positive or negative direction). We are closer to bringing everyone together than ever before." What seems to be true from the people we spoke with who are at the highest levels in the state all the way to the local providers in the community, is wanting others to know that they really care about the children. With many of the providers we spoke with, moving forward means helping them stabilize their business so that they can focus on quality.

Report Summary Recommendations

The primary strength of all those involved in early learning in Mississippi is the desire for a system that serves all children. The intention from all parties is to serve the children, to have a system that is high quality, stable, and accessible. In addition, there is deep knowledge in Mississippi of what it takes to meet early learning needs of children. The biggest challenges are the lack of an agreed upon strategic direction, lack of agreement on how to fix those aspects of the system that are ineffective, lack of collaboration, and poor relationships. Our recommendations to address these challenges are as follows:

1. Convene a group of early care players from across the system to come to agreement on the current state of the early care system and the desired future state. If SECAC is a trusted structure, we recommend using it to complete this task. If not, the membership should be expanded to include representatives from all parts of the early care system or another existing structure used. Due to low relational trust among various players in the system we recommend this group be facilitated.
2. Since divisions between providers, state leaders, and others involved in early care are deep and relationships strained, we recommend each group meet separately to begin healing divisions and prepare to work collaboratively with other systems players. The work in these meetings is about helping each group see how they are part of the solution and develop their leadership skills to help move things forward.
3. The state government is key to an early care system's effectiveness therefore we recommend one of the outcomes of the redesign group is to prepare recommendations to go to the legislature. In addition, players from all parts of the early care system should mobilize with one voice in making these recommendations.
4. Build community, repair relationships. Conduct mediation sessions. Conduct a Leading for Equity (LFE) session designed to name tensions in relationships and build relationships.
5. Since the waiting list seems to be substantial, we recommend an analysis of the list, identification of open slots with providers, and looking at what it would take to eliminate the list. These data should be used to build community interest, engagement and support to redesign the early care system. Engaging the community in these concerns could serve to sustain momentum until the redesign is complete.
6. Professional development to increase quality care is very important, however, since there is disagreement about what type of professional development is most needed, we recommend a professional development needs assessment be conducted and a plan created to provide effective PD. Providers should be highly involved in the needs assessment.
7. Formation of a group that will recommend a redesign of the early care system where the result is access to care for all children, high quality care, and stability of providers. This would be a brand new, cross sector group that is capable of bringing innovative ideas in the redesign of the system. The focus of the redesign should be on what is best for the children and should identify how each part of the system can contribute to the success of children, agreement on a fair quality rating system, and an action plan to improve quality.