



**Comments of the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network to the  
New Jersey Council for Young Children  
January 30, 2015**

The Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN) appreciates this opportunity to provide feedback and input to the New Jersey Council for Young Children (NJCYC). We acknowledge the hard work that has gone into the activities of the Council and value the opportunity to provide our feedback and recommendations.

Before providing some overall general comments, SPAN reiterates our recommendation regarding the inclusion of informed, effective parent voices in the development of early childhood policy, including the designation of a representative of a parent-led organization on the NJCYC decision-making table. We appreciate the fact that SPAN has been provided the opportunity to be involved in several of the Council's Committees. We recommend in addition ensuring that parent leaders and representatives of family organizations are included in the Council's "decision-making" seats so that these voices are at the table when decisions are made about the development of new programs or initiatives. Having parent and parent representative voices on the Council will bring real-life experiences that should be informing decision-making into that decision-making process.

Further, we appreciate that County Councils for Young Children are being developed, and that family members from these Councils will select one (or more?) representatives to sit on the Council. We note that many decisions have already been made about the work of the Council as well as the focus of the successful Early Childhood Race to the Top application, and recommend that the Council be open to recommendations for changes from family representatives once the County Councils are up and running and their designated representative(s) are on the Council. Further, it will continue to be important to have at least one representative from a family-led organization on the Council, particularly one that has ongoing interaction with diverse families of young children including those with special needs, to ensure that the experiences of multiple families from a range of backgrounds and circumstances are brought to the decision-making table.

We further recommend that, whenever the Council provides an opportunity for testimony, there be regional forums, at times when families are able to attend.

## **Recommendations**

### ***Program Improvement/Quality Rating & Improvement System***

SPAN supports the focus on program improvement and moving forward with the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS).

Several years ago, SPAN received funding from Advocates for Children of New Jersey to work with diverse parents to identify the components of QRIS that are most important to families, and to develop and pilot a parent tool about the QRIS. It is important to note that, based on this work, there is strong parent support for the QRIS. In addition to being piloted at six child care centers, the QRIS self-assessment tool was reviewed in three focus groups of diverse parents of

young children, two with parents whose children were in child care centers participating in the QRIS pilot, and one statewide with a range of families of young children. Parents in the focus groups confirmed the importance of the components addressed in the QRIS self assessment, and identified those areas that were most important for and to parents. Following these focus groups, a parent tool was developed and piloted in six focus groups with parents whose children attended child care and Head Start centers.

#### *Recommendations re: QRIS*

SPAN recommends that resources be immediately dedicated to educating and empowering parents of young children concerning the Grow NJ Kids and how they can use QRIS to make decisions about centers and/or advocate for center improvements.

SPAN also recommends that resources be immediately dedicated to develop appropriate parent tools related to the QRIS, including an accompanying parent assessment, in multiple languages, and to provide training and support for families to understand the QRIS, the tools, and how to use them to become more informed consumers as well as to help encourage quality improvement by the centers that serve their children. Such work should also specify the role of and supports to families in the development of brochures, contents and “look” of the family portal, and setting up the rating system.

SPAN recommends a review of the QRIS to identify additional areas where a specific focus on issues impacting children with disabilities and special healthcare needs can be incorporated.

#### *Early Learning and Development Standards*

As an active member of the Early Learning Standards committee, SPAN strongly supports NJ’s Early Learning Standards. We believe that using this common set of learning and development standards for children birth to three will support the full range of diverse *families* to have developmentally appropriate expectations, provide developmentally appropriate learning experiences for their children, and have the knowledge to ask informed questions of providers, child care programs, and schools.

#### *Recommendations re: Early Learning and Development Standards*

SPAN recommends that the Council support the development and implementation of training materials and resources for families related to the Early Learning Standards, and recommend that these materials and resources be prepared by and/or in collaboration with a family organization with expertise in developing and implementing effective training and support for families.

SPAN also recommends the allocation of funds to provide training for families on the Early Learning Standards and how they can use them to improve their young children’s development, and partner with early childhood professionals across systems to maximize their young children’s development.

#### *Early Workforce Preparation*

Effective early childhood workforce preparation is critical. However, to attract and retain high quality early childhood professionals, our systems need to pay them a living wage. How will this central need be addressed?

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, SPAN appreciates and values the work of the NJCYC and of the state agencies involved in rolling out the new Early Childhood Race to the Top project. We appreciate the opportunities we have been provided to help shape and implement these important initiatives. We look forward to a greater focus on the education and engagement of diverse families at the individual, program, and systems level, including implementation of initiatives to provide families of young children with the tools, information, resources, and support they need to be effective partners with early childhood systems and professionals.