

NAEYC Position Statement on Developing and Implementing Effective Public Policies to Promote Early Childhood and School-Age Care Program Accreditation

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This NAEYC position statement is endorsed by the National School-Age Care Alliance, the National Association for Family Child Care, the Council on Accreditation of Services for Families and Children, Inc., and the National Early Childhood Program Accreditation Commission, Inc.

Children's participation in early childhood and school-age care programs is growing

In recent decades one of the most significant changes in American family life has been the rapid increase in children's participation in child care and pre-school programs prior to school entry and in school-age care programs during out-of-school time. Today approximately 6.6 million children who have not yet entered kindergarten regularly attend centers, and an additional 3 million such children regularly attend family child care programs where they are cared for by a nonrelative in the provider's home (estimates are based on data from West, Wright, & Hausken 1995). School-age care is said to be the fastest growing segment of the child care arena, with estimates of approximately 2 million school-age children attending some 50,000 programs and nearly 5 million school-age children left unsupervised during a typical week (National Institute on Out-of-School Time 1997).

The programs that provide care and education to children prior to kindergarten entry and during out-of-school time are found in many different settings under various names: child care centers, Head Start programs, family child care homes, preschools, school-

age care, recreation programs, and youth programs, to name a few. No matter what the name or the setting, it is crucial that children be safe and that their development and learning be enhanced. We know that the experiences children have and the skills they develop in these programs can help or hinder their development, not just during childhood, but throughout their lifetime (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart 1993; Locklear et al. 1994; Posner & Vandell 1994; Brooks & Mojica 1995; Center for the Future of Children 1995; Hart & Risley 1995; Center for Research on Women 1996; Bredekamp & Copple 1997; Kagan & Cohen 1997).

Numerous recent studies suggest that, despite the fact that the majority of America's children spend at least some of their time in child care, many programs for preschool children in centers and homes fail to provide a level of care that enhances or maximizes children's early development and learning (Lazar et al. 1982; Cryer, Clifford, & Harms 1988; Burchinal, Lee, & Ramey 1989; Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips 1989; Galinsky et al. 1994; Riley et al. 1994; Helburn 1995; Miller 1995). In addition, many school-age care programs do not effectively engage children in their program activities and operate in inadequate facilities (Sep-panen, Love, & Bernstein 1993).

Programs face challenges to provide high-quality services

Early childhood and school-age care programs face many of the same challenges that make it difficult to provide high-quality services. Many programs rely heavily on parent fees for program revenue (even programs associated with public schools), and many parents are unable to afford the cost of high-quality care. Regulatory systems in some states have standards and enforcement practices that are inadequate to promote good care. Given the low compensation that characterizes the field, numerous early childhood and school-age care programs face severe problems in attracting and retaining well-qualified professionals.

These problems reflect the lack of infrastructure to support a comprehensive system of childhood care and education programs. Kagan and Cohen (1997) identify the necessary infrastructure elements as parent information and engagement; professional development and licensing; facility licensing, enforcement, and program accreditation; funding and financing; and governance, planning, and accountability. As part of a *system*, each of these elements is interrelated; and to maximize the effectiveness of

the overall system, no element can be neglected.

Public policies promote accreditation to improve services

This position statement focuses on the role that policies related to program accreditation can play in improving the overall delivery of high-quality services for children and youth. Accreditation can be a very powerful program-improvement tool because it provides a process by which professionals and families can evaluate programs in relation to professional standards and identify areas needing improvement. Programs that complete the accreditation process make the changes necessary to demonstrate their substantial compliance with the standards and are rewarded by the public recognition they receive as an accredited program. Because it represents achievement of professional standards, accreditation is also useful as a quality-improvement benchmark and an accountability measure for policymakers, funders, and community planners.

Accreditation is used extensively in public education, higher education, and health care to assure consumers that services meet a professionally recognized level of quality (Hamm 1998). It is a relatively new phenomenon in early childhood and school-age care programs. As a result, only a small percentage of early childhood and school-age care programs are accredited. However, program interest in pursuing accreditation is growing fast, along with a proliferation of accreditation systems. These developments have been prompted by an increased awareness in the importance of children's early learning experiences and by recent legislative action. Policymakers, especially at the state level, are promoting program accreditation in early childhood and school-age care programs as one strategy to improve learning opportunities for children of all ages and to hold agencies and providers accountable for providing quality care (Stoney 1996; Morgan 1998; Warman 1998).

Many states are designating child care quality-improvement funds to

help programs pay for various costs associated with accreditation, including accreditation fees, purchase of new equipment, training expenses, and better compensation for professionals. A few states are making large investments in facilitation projects that provide direct support to those engaged in the accreditation process. Other states have concentrated on increasing public awareness of the benefits of program accreditation and increasing involvement of the private sector in funding child care initiatives as part of a comprehensive plan for building quality.

The newest trend is for states to create differential reimbursement rates, providing higher subsidies to eligible families that use accredited programs than to those using nonaccredited programs. This strategy has been used with two goals in mind: (1) to help make high-quality programs more accessible to families with low incomes and enable accredited programs to maintain the quality of services for all families they serve, and (2) to serve as an incentive to other programs to become accredited. Finally, some federal, state, and local policies tie accreditation status to ongoing funding opportunities, requiring that programs become accredited to receive funds. Some policymakers are considering developing care and education accreditation policies like those used in other fields that give accrediting bodies a quasi-regulatory role by demanding that programs become accredited not only to receive funding but also to be licensed or certified to practice (Edmunds 1998; Hamm 1998).

Key recommendations for effective public policies

In June 1998 a diverse group of leaders, including state administrators, researchers, representatives of various accrediting bodies, and practitioners, participated in a conference sponsored by the McCormick Tribune Foundation to review trends in accreditation policies and identify how policies impact on the quality of services available to children and families. The following recommendations grew out

of that meeting. They are intended to ensure that childhood care and education accreditation policies are effectively developed and implemented to improve the overall delivery of high-quality early childhood and school-age services in our nation.

These recommendations are based on current knowledge about accreditation and how it operates as part of the overall infrastructure supporting childhood care and education services.

Recommendation 1

Policies promoting program accreditation should support and build on a strong regulatory system, not seek to replace regulation with accreditation.

Rationale: Program regulation and program accreditation are complementary, and both are needed to advance excellence in child care programs. An effective regulatory system sets standards and monitors programs' compliance with the standards to ensure that all children are protected from harm in early childhood and school-age care settings (see "NAEYC Position Statement on Licensing and Public Regulation of Early Childhood Programs" [NAEYC 1998]). An effective accreditation system sets high standards for professional practice and engages programs in a continuous process of improvement to provide high-quality services.

The voluntary professional standards set by accrediting bodies are designed to build on mandatory state standards, not replace them. In fact, several researchers have found that providers in states with low standards or inadequate monitoring systems have more difficulty achieving accreditation standards (Phillips, Howes, & Whitebook 1992; Helburn 1995; Harris, Morgan, & Sprague 1996).

Recommendation 2

Policies promoting program accreditation should seek to increase public awareness about the role of mandatory regulation and voluntary accreditation systems in supporting children's healthy development and learning during the critical early years

and during their out-of-school time throughout childhood.

Rationale: The public must understand the link between children's healthy development and learning and good early childhood programs to create a demand for better care. All parents want the best for their children, but many do not know that program accreditation is a sign of good programs (Morgan 1998). The more that parents demand to know whether a program is in compliance with licensing requirements and whether it has achieved program accreditation or is in the process of becoming accredited, the greater the incentive for program providers to meet state standards and pursue program accreditation. Wider public recognition of the importance of good early childhood and school-age care programs in supporting children's development and learning can stimulate quality improvements within the overall field.

Recommendation 3

Policies promoting program accreditation should identify the criteria that accrediting bodies must meet to ensure the integrity of each system and the validity and reliability of their accreditation decisions. Specifically, each accrediting body should be able to document that it meet the following criteria:

- The accreditation standards are based on research about program quality and are periodically reviewed and updated with input from diverse stakeholders and a variety of experts.
- The accreditation process includes a system for comprehensive self-evaluation by the program, on-site peer review by one or more well-trained professionals, expert evaluation, a time-limited award of accreditation, and a comprehensive renewal process.
- The instruments and training procedures used in the process are proven to be reliable and valid.
- Administrative policies and system evaluation procedures are in place to avoid conflicts of interest and to reassess a program's compliance with accreditation criteria when major changes occur, complaints are filed, or

deferred programs wish to appeal the accreditation decision.

Rationale: For accreditation to be meaningful, the standards must be based on research findings about the effects of program practices on the quality of services and outcomes for children and families. In addition, the evaluation process must ensure that those who are awarded accreditation are actually putting the standards into practice. Various accreditation systems have been developed to serve programs in particular settings or age groups; encouraging a choice of accreditation systems for particular forms is likely to result in greater participation in accreditation as more providers are likely to identify a system appropriate for their setting or interests. However, any eligible accrediting body must be able to document its system's compliance with all of the criteria specified in the recommendation.

Recommendation 4

Policies promoting program accreditation by providing financial incentives to those who have achieved accreditation should ensure that adequate funding is appropriated to cover the ongoing costs of maintaining high-quality services, including providing staff with equitable salaries. In addition, to be equitable, adequate public and private funding should be made available to help all interested programs make the quality improvements necessary to meet high accreditation standards and to pay for accreditation materials and processing fees.

Rationale: Given the inadequate funding and financing that characterize the delivery of many early childhood and school-age services, the costs associated with making improvements to meet and maintain accreditation standards can be a burden. High-quality program costs are significant and include facility improvement costs and higher personnel costs needed to improve staff-child ratios and ensure highly qualified professionals with equitable compensation. Small financial incentives to accred-

ited programs do little to enhance accredited programs' ongoing ability to pay for the costs of providing high-quality services or to ensure that more programs will be able to achieve high standards of practice.

In addition, when financial support is limited to accredited programs and no funds are available to programs to make quality improvements to achieve accreditation, issues of equity arise as the gulf is widened between the *haves* (those programs that can readily achieve accreditation) and the *have-nots* (those programs for which accreditation is out of reach). Greater pressure is placed on programs to make temporary improvements or hide deficiencies to achieve accreditation, and while more programs may engage in the process, their success in improving services is likely to be limited.

Recommendation 5

Policies promoting program accreditation should provide a variety of resources to meet the diverse needs of teachers, directors, owners, parents, and advisory boards involved in the process of making program improvements to meet accreditation criteria. These resources can include, but are not limited to, quality-improvement grants, training workshops, facilitation projects, peer support and mentoring projects, technical assistance, and expert consultations.

Rationale: Program accreditation is often initiated by a person such as the program director or a group such as the parent advisory committee that believes it is a worthwhile activity. However, to complete the process, all teachers, directors, owners, parents, and advisory boards need to be committed to spending a large amount of time and energy in the process. Because it is a complex process that involves lasting change and often requires significant improvements, extrinsic motivation, including financial incentives, may not be sufficient to achieve accreditation. Providers can become easily overwhelmed by the process and often need resources and training to educate and motivate all those involved, familiarize themselves

with accreditation materials, conduct a self-evaluation, develop and implement a strategic plan, make necessary changes, and document their practices for peer review and expert evaluation (Goldfarb & Flis 1996). Because of the diversity of program providers, it is important to offer a variety of resources and training and allow program providers to choose the support strategy that works best for them.

Recommendation 6

Policies promoting program accreditation should be linked to an overall plan for supporting the creation of a highly qualified, stable early childhood and school-age care professional workforce. Key components of the plan should include

- strengthening teacher preparation and ongoing professional development programs;
- supporting individuals' efforts to earn related college degrees;
- developing initiatives that provide higher compensation and better working conditions for all professionals, with special incentives to support professionals who have achieved higher levels of education and training; and
- creating systems to track individuals' professional achievement such as professional licensing or career ladders.

Rationale: In areas with good professional development systems and strong regulations related to professional qualifications, caregivers, teachers, and program directors are better able to meet the high professional standards required for program accreditation. When good teacher preparation programs and ongoing professional development opportunities are not available, or when professional qualifications are not required, providers have more trouble achieving accreditation. Closely linked to the issue of professional qualifications is the issue of compensation (Willer 1994). Inadequate compensation is associated with high rates of turnover and lower program quality (Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips 1998), antithetical to achieving accreditation.

Inadequate compensation and its related turnover also make it difficult to continue to maintain the level of quality required by accreditation over time.

Recommendation 7

Policies promoting program accreditation should promote an overall plan for improving the system of childhood care and education and outcomes for children and families and use achievement of accreditation as one of many benchmarks to help track progress.

Rationale: To make improvements in the overall system of childhood care and education services, more coordinated efforts that provide for greater involvement of the private sector are needed, as well as collaboration between service agencies and organizations at all levels of government. The number of accredited programs and the number of subsidized children enrolled in them can be used to help measure a state's progress in building opportunities for children. Achievement of accreditation means that a program has demonstrated substantial compliance with accreditation standards and deserves recognition as a good program. However, it does not mean that the program has completed the process of making program improvements; accreditation is an ongoing process of striving for excellence. Similarly, programs in the process of self-study that have not completed the accreditation process may have taken significant steps to improve their quality, such as recruiting highly qualified professionals or upgrading their equipment, even though they have not yet achieved accreditation.

Conclusion

While we welcome policies to promote early childhood and school-age care program accreditation, we are concerned that accreditation may be misconstrued as a solution to all the problems facing the field. To effectively impact outcomes for children,

public policies promoting accreditation must be based on an understanding of how accreditation operates within the overall system. A holistic approach to public policies promoting accreditation is critical to ensuring that children and youth have the opportunities they deserve to develop to their full potential.

The accreditation policy recommendations in this position statement are intended for all stakeholders—that is, the entire community—because everyone has a role in improving the quality of children's early experiences. However, each has a particular responsibility:

- Accrediting bodies must continue to refine their standards and practices to preserve the integrity of their system. They need to collaborate with each other, with researchers, and with practitioners to respond to the demand for new outcome-based accountability measures and to help inform the public of the benefits of accreditation.
- Policymakers must focus on integrating accreditation policies into a comprehensive plan to build an infrastructure that supports proven quality-improvement efforts, ensures the protection of children from harm, and promotes equitable access to high-quality programs. Policymakers need to significantly increase funding for child care as well as provide new funds to promote public-private partnerships to help make good programs available to all children.
- Early childhood and school-age child care professionals must view program accreditation as an ongoing process, not an end product that is completed with the award of accreditation. The professional field, in its meetings, publications, course work, and accreditation materials, should stress the importance of continuous improvement and continuously striving for excellence. Colleges and universities must be committed to ensuring that their academic programs enable early childhood and school-age care professionals to be competent teachers.

- Teachers and program directors have the primary responsibility for continually implementing accreditation standards in their daily interactions with children and families. They must strive to meet the standards on a daily basis and should avail themselves of professional development opportunities and resources to enhance their programs.

- Parents, researchers, community leaders, and the broader public must be involved in developing creative initiatives, including public-private partnerships, to support program efforts to raise their quality and become accredited. The involvement of the broader public can help create a demand for new investments in high-quality early childhood education and school-age care programs.

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