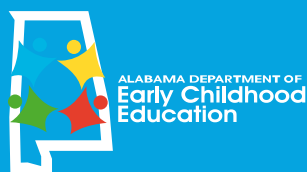




Alabama's Standards *for* Early Learning and Development

APPENDIX SEVEN

EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS AS ADVOCATES



ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF
Early Childhood
Education

In partnership with



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APPENDIX SEVEN

Early Childhood Professionals as Advocates

Early childhood professionals have a unique opportunity to advocate for young children, their families, and for the profession itself. In fact, it's one of the most important things we can do; to speak out collectively as a group voice, to inform others about the benefits of early childhood, to promote the impact of quality on children's learning, and the importance of supporting the workforce. Advocacy does not have to be difficult; it can start with a conversation with a friend, family, neighbors, and others in the community (McCormack, 2015). It can involve defending a person's needs or supporting a cause. The Ounce of Prevention Toolkit tells us you're an advocate if you have helped a family receive services; stood up for someone who was being treated unfairly; attended a parent-teacher conference at your child's school or participated in a city council meeting.

Advocacy in Early Childhood is Foundational

Early childhood agencies, both on a national and state level, have recognized the importance of advocacy and its relationship to the field's professionalism. They include references to advocacy and provide resources in their Codes of Ethics, program standards and on their websites.

National Programs' Codes and Standards

The *National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)* specifies advocacy within its sixth standard in the Unifying Framework. The first goal of the Standard 6, Professionalism as an Early Childhood Educator, refers to early childhood professionals' capacity to identify and participate as a member of the profession, serving as advocates for children, families and the profession. "Early childhood educators understand the profession's distinctive values, history, knowledge base, and mission, as well as the connections between the early childhood education profession and other related disciplines and professions with which they collaborate while serving young children and their families. They know that equity in education begins in early childhood and that early childhood educators have a special opportunity and responsibility to advance equity in their daily classroom work with children and their work with families and colleagues." (NAEYC Unifying Framework)

The Division of Early Childhood, (DEC) of the Council of Exceptional Children includes policies about advocacy throughout its code of ethics. In its first principle, Professional Practices, it offers guidance "We shall serve as advocates for children with disabilities and their families and for the professionals who serve them by supporting both policy and programmatic decisions that enhance the quality of their lives." The second principal, Professional Development and Preparation, includes, "We shall continually be aware of issues challenging the field of early childhood special education and advocate for changes in laws, regulations, and policies leading to improved outcomes and services for young children with disabilities and their families. Advocacy is also cited in guidance for the third principal, Responsive Family Practices, "We shall advocate for equal access to high quality services and supports for all children and families to enhance their quality of lives."

Head Start's parents and families are encouraged to become advocates. At a local level, Head Start and Early Head Start's professionals support and guide family adults to take on leadership roles where they participate in decision-making and policy development. The Head Start Performance Standards specify the creation of parent policy councils, parent committees and transition practices to ensure active family participation. Within its Knowledge Center, *National Head Start Association (NHSA)* provides members with resources to reach out to legislators and community leaders and for participation in national Head Start campaigns.

Child care professionals can join *National Child Care Association* to learn about legislation that may impact them, obtain resources related to funding sources, such as the Child Care Development Block Grant, and obtain resources including videos and fact sheets about quality child care and advocacy.

The *National Home Visiting Resource Center* is a comprehensive organization that provides data, research briefs, and other resources to specifically support home visiting professionals. The Center's goal is to "support sound decisions in policy and practice to help children and families thrive."



Dedicated to infants and toddlers, Zero to Three offers, within its advocacy section, resources on parenting, workforce development, and policy development. Journals, podcasts, technical assistance, publications and webinars are among the many materials that viewers can access to support the youngest population.

State Advocacy

Within Alabama, several agencies have joined together to advocate for high quality early learning programs. Each of them share a common mission that focuses on school access, readiness, and success. Together, A+ Education Partnership, Alabama Giving, Alabama Partnership for Children and VOICES for Alabama's Children have formed the Alabama School Readiness Alliance (ASRA), a statewide coalition that is designed to support the expansion of high-quality pre-k with a goal of ensuring that all children enter school ready to learn.

In addition to its own advocacy work, the Alabama Association for Early Care and Education (AALECE) provides resources and support to its members. The Alabama Family Child Care Association's (ALFCCA) mission statement specifies advocacy, "...an organization dedicated to unite Alabama's Family Child Care providers in establishing higher quality standards, advocating for provider benefits, building and enhancing resources, and providing consistent support for local associations". Federation of Child Centers Alabama (FOCAL) also includes advocacy within its mission, stating, "...

to measurably improve the lives of children and families in Alabama through childcare training, leadership development, advocacy and organizing.”

Head Start professionals can benefit from the state’s Alabama Head Start Association that “is the unified voice representing early education and advocacy for low-income children and families in Alabama.” Additionally Alabama’s Head Start State Collaboration Office (HSSCO) is housed within The Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education and strives to ensure a unified early care and education system that supports low-income families.

Alabama Parent Training and Information (AL PTI), developed primarily for families, “provides information and services to Alabama families with children ages birth to twenty-six with disabilities. The program is designed to empower and enable them to work collaboratively with schools and agencies to improve services for their children. AL PTI provides free information and training to families to assist them in becoming advocates for their children with disabilities.” The Alabama Council for Developmental Disabilities is another organization that “promotes independence, advocacy, productivity, and inclusion for Alabamians with developmental disabilities.”

Advocacy in Action

Advocate for Children

Informed professionals who develop and maintain positive relationships with parents and families are ultimately advocating on behalf of the child. Professionals can share their knowledge and expertise, while at the same time, gain understanding about each child’s needs through a family partnership.

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All young children deserve access to high quality early learning, and need champions to design and implement culturally, linguistically, and developmentally appropriate programming to ensure children’s development and learning. In particular, children who are at-risk for learning benefit from access to early learning experiences and skilled professionals who promote equity for young children.

Advocate for High Quality Early Childhood Programs

Professionals can advocate for high quality early learning policies and practices. It is important to stay current with research, new curriculum recommendations, and new understandings about the way children learn and with new initiatives within their communities and the state. Professionals can participate in quality initiatives that provide resources and new perspective and transfer that information into everyday practice. Equally important is professionals’ delivery of new ideas and perspectives to colleagues and families to help them make good decisions about high quality early learning.

Program and child-specific data is foundational to articulate the practices and policies that

influence children's healthy development and learning. Professionals need to collect, use, and analyze data to inform practices, policies and standards. To the extent possible, they should participate in new state and local initiatives that support high quality elements for early learning. Professionals can take part in reading or literacy campaigns and add new materials and experiences for children that promote learning.

Advocate for Professional Recognition

It is critical for early learning professionals to identify their own strengths and areas for growth. This enables them to seek out and participate in new learning opportunities to advance knowledge. The more knowledge and practice each professional attains, the more uniquely qualified they are to work in this unique and special profession. They should work towards meeting, retaining or exceeding the required credentials for their role and to seek advancement when appropriate.

Professionals can learn to use tools to enhance their stories, sharing a personal testimony, or a personal challenge or success to illustrate a viewpoint. Many times data is very useful and helpful in advocacy but having a personal testimony gives a face to the data and makes a bigger impact giving data life.

Join and participate in professional organizations to keep informed, and to become part of a unified force. There is power in numbers. There are many organizations that promote early learning: NAEYC and its state and local affiliates, Division for Early Childhood, Head Start, and Zero to Three are just a few examples of organizations that offer online resources and communications. Within Alabama, the Alabama Association for Early Care and Education advocates for high quality, affordable child care. Membership offers access to resources and professional development.

Advocate for the Communities' Support

Community groups and services advocate for young children and their families. Local Children's Policy Councils or advisory committees typically represent different agencies and families within the community to address disparities and concerns. The community may offer support via grants, or letters of support for grants and new programming. Without a community voice, state leaders may be unaware of service needs and gaps. Legislators and policy makers need to hear from each of us. They can't change what they don't know. It is up to us to educate and inform leaders about issues that are important. There are many ways to work with systems including writing letters, calling, or meeting face to face. To find out who your legislative representatives are and the contact information go to <http://capwiz.com/state-al/home/> and enter your home address and zip code. Join Voices for Alabama's Children's Child Advocacy Network to stay informed and to access tool kits and tip sheets.

Write letters. Be specific, brief and courteous. Address your letter to specific legislators and if you are able to, include information on bills they are considering. Share your opinion and why you feel the issue is important. Give sources of information. Include your name, address and a little about you and make sure you request a reply.

Call. This is quick and easy. Plan your call and keep your point to only one issue. Introduce yourself as a constituent (they want to stay in office and your opinion matters to them). Outline your issue and why it's important. Request a response. You may have to leave a message with someone if the legislator is unavailable at the time you call. Thank them for their time and encourage others to call about the issue as well.

Meet face to face. Like the other methods, plan your meeting carefully. Keep to only one issue. Organize notes so you stay on topic. Make an appointment ahead of time. Discuss your concerns and give personal stories to illustrate why this issue is so important. Prepare a one page fact sheet that they can review on what the issue is, and what they can do along with sources of information to read more if they choose. Follow up the meeting with a thank you note thanking them for their time and assistance in the matter.

Parents' and Families' Advocacy

Parents and families have many different opportunities to engage in advocacy work as part of the early childhood community. Just as professionals are encouraged to support their profession, parents and families can advocate for their children, for access to high quality programs, and for the use of responsive processes within a program. Early childhood professionals can encourage and guide families' advocacy by building processes for their involvement into policies and action.

Parent and Families' Involvement

Parents and families can take an active role in their children's experiences at their early learning program. They can volunteer, engage in informal and formal information sharing about children's growth and development, attend programs' family gatherings, and join the professionals in linking the home-school connection.

Parents and families have a responsibility to protect the rights of their children. A parent may need to advocate in the school to receive services for the child to enhance development and learning or to support children's specific and unique learning needs. Early childhood professionals can remind family adults, that as their children's first teacher, they know their children well and their voice is valuable and necessary.

Parents and families can also advocate by being part of the program's decision-making process. They can join committees or advisory groups to participate in the programs' development or review of policies and standards.

Parents and families can share their views and needs with community members, businesses and legislators. Communities can best understand the strengths and gaps of their programs when they hear from the adults in children's lives.

Guidance for Families

Be informed. Read more and learn more about specific challenges your child may have. Understand your child's strengths too. Research more about how you can become actively involved to enhance and support development and learning. Keep current with the latest information.

Keep and organize paperwork. Keep copies of all documents such as report cards, progress reports, evaluations, medical records, etc. They can help support and highlight the needs in your advocacy efforts.

Build relationships. Having a good relationship with others who are involved with your child can help support work across systems of home and for example school. Good relationships help with good communication and often reduce miscommunication or misunderstandings.

Ask questions. Sometimes professionals forget that not everyone shares the same knowledge or background. Make sure to ask questions on anything you don't understand. Be clear so that you can make better informed decisions. Don't be afraid to disagree, remember you are the expert on your child and you are their voice; let others know your concerns. Remember to keep records of who you have spoken with and notes from conversations that you can refer to if necessary. Learn the language and ask for clarification on phrases and terms professionals use that you may not understand.

Remember you are part of the team. You are the expert on your child. Your voice and knowledge are valuable amongst the team. Listen openly to other professionals on the team, but do not feel intimidated. Your contribution is equally valuable.

Stay calm and collected. Even if you disagree try to remember that the other team members are there to try to help. Getting angry or making threats is not productive.

Talk to your child. You are helping to represent his/her voice, don't forget to ask for their input about how they are feeling or how things are going.

Communicate regularly. Parent teacher meetings are good opportunities to discuss questions and concerns about your child, but you don't have to wait for those to occur. In fact, with good relationship building you can enhance regular communication with other professionals working with your child and keep up with updates and changes. Make sure as a parent you are also updating the teacher or provider with important information, or changes you see at home.

"How do we change the world for our children in a positive and sustained way? The answer is simple. If we want to change the world, we have to change policy. Children are powerless because they have no voice and they have no vote. They are virtual afterthoughts at best in the political process. That is where we come in. Through advocacy, each of us can help level the playing field for our children."

MELANIE R. BRIDGEFORTH,
FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR VOICES FOR ALABAMA'S CHILDREN