

Public Comments, Legislative Task Force on At-Risk Students  
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My name is Beth Orlansky. I am an attorney at the Mississippi Center for Justice, working with the Mississippi Low Income Child Care Initiative on policy issues that affect low income families who need assistance in covering the cost of child care in order to work. There are currently about 132,000 Mississippi children under the age of 12 living in poverty. These children are considered at-risk and are the focus of our concern.

It is commonly accepted today that the early childhood experience is critical in preparing children for school and laying the groundwork for them to succeed. The State of Mississippi currently provides educational opportunities for all children K-12. While it would be beneficial for programs to be available for all children birth-5 as well, we are only asking the Legislature to ensure that assistance is available for families who cannot afford to provide adequate child care for their children.

In order to support their children, parents must work. In order to work, parents must have safe, fulltime environments in which to leave their children. Utilizing current child care facilities to implement quality preschool curricula will help prepare low income children for kindergarten and keep them from starting school behind.

Child care subsidies are available to low income families through the Child Care Development Fund. Currently, the state receives approximately \$50 million from the federal government for child care certificates, and the state puts in about \$5 million in matching funds. In addition, the state has used another \$16 million in TANF funds for child care assistance. Spending \$2165.00 per child per year, the state accommodates approximately 33,000 children with child care subsidies.

Child care subsidies are available to families making up to 85% of the state median income. To put that in perspective, the state median is \$34,278; 85% of that is \$29,136. A family with two children in child care pays approximately \$10,000 per year on child care expenses, which is 34% of the gross income. (A family whose income is 50% of the state median spends 58% of its gross income on child care.) Without assistance, this is an overwhelming burden.

Current CCDF funds and designated TANF funds provide child care certificates for less than half of the qualified children. Last year there was approximately \$30 million in unallocated TANF funds, which could be

utilized to cover this shortfall. There needs to be enough money available to provide child care assistance to every family qualified to receive assistance, and the use of TANF money for this purpose would not put a burden on the state budget. (We understand that a significant allocation of TANF funds is already being used for child care subsidies, but an additional \$30 million would make a significant difference in closing the gap between covered and uncovered eligible children.)

With the number of TANF recipients drastically reduced, the number of low income families needing child care subsidies steadily increases. It is critical, therefore, to ensure that enough money is allocated to the Child Care Development Fund or transferred from TANF funds to allow working parents to have safe, reliable child care for their children.

This summer we visited over 500 child care centers in the state in order to gather information concerning barriers to participation in the CCDF program. The results are attached to my written comments. Many providers reported that parents are discouraged from applying for CCDF certificates because there are no funds available. Parents cannot afford to keep their children in child care while waiting months or years to come off the waiting list. While the waiting list was drastically reduced during the last legislative session, funds were depleted, and the waiting list has built up again in the last six months. In addition to the 1,827 children we identified as being on the waiting list currently, we identified an additional 1,500 parents who have not applied for certificates despite being qualified because of hassle, red tape, and the requirement that they file a child support action against the child's father in order to be served. If there was enough money available to provide child care assistance for all qualified children, these barriers would disappear.

Availability of affordable child care for children from birth to age 5 is an economic issue that affects all of society. Children starting school with the necessary foundation are more likely to be successful students and less likely to be burdens on society. Workers with dependable child care are more likely to be dependable members of the workforce. The cost of childcare is equal to or greater than all other regular monthly expenses incurred by a family, and a family earning less than 85% of the state median income cannot make ends meet if it must incur the entire cost of child care.

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