

I am writing to support the early learning investment in the proposed FY 2017 budget – \$11.3 million for sustaining quality early learning progress. These funds will help maintain the level of investment Delaware has had, through a federal grant, for several years—and protect the investments we have made in our state’s youngest children and families and the early learning programs, professionals, and communities that support them.

The \$11.3 million budget includes the following key programs that help young children – especially those from low-income families – be better prepared for school and life. And, recent investments in these areas this have showed tremendous results:

- **Tiered reimbursement and Delaware Stars onsite support and assessment** comprise the majority of the budget. These funds directly enable early learning programs to achieve and maintain higher levels of quality and serve thousands of low-income children. Delaware Stars helps early learning programs improve quality and assigns a 1 to 5 Star rating to help families make child care choices. Delaware Stars participation has increased by more than 300% in the past four years. Now more than 550 early learning programs are participating. And, more than 59 percent of low-income children in child care are enrolled in highly rated Stars programs, up from just 5 percent in 2011.
 - **\$5.7 M: Tiered Reimbursement** - Delaware’s tiered reimbursement program makes additional payments to early learning and school-age programs that attain a 3, 4 or 5 Star rating through Delaware Stars and participate in the state's child care subsidy program by accepting Purchase of Care vouchers.
 - **\$2.5 M: Delaware Stars Onsite Support & Assessment** - Technical Assistants work onsite in early learning and school-age programs to help them create and implement quality improvement plans. Quality improvement plans address books and classroom materials, teacher training, curriculum, class group sizes, and the use of developmental screenings or child observational assessments.
- **\$1.6 M: Early learning teacher education and retention programs** – These funds support T.E.A.C.H. scholarships for low-paid early learning teachers to work toward degrees in early childhood, the administrator credential, and retention awards for teachers who increase their level of education or credential and stay in the classroom for a year.
- **\$480 K: Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (ECMHC) project** – These funds go to the Kids Department and cover the costs of five Mental Health consultants working onsite in early learning programs to reduce challenging behaviors and avoid preschool expulsions. More than 2,400 children have received intensive Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation services— reducing behavioral challenges and achieving a 99% success rate in avoiding preschool suspensions.
- **\$420 K: Developmental screenings and child surveys** – These funds support ongoing developmental screenings in early learning programs to detect and address problems early, as well as developmental surveys that assess children’s physical, cognitive and social-emotional development in preschool and at kindergarten entry. In recent years, over 80,000 young children have received developmental screenings – moving the state from last in the

nation to 21st in the percent of young children receiving these screenings, which are critical for identifying and addressing developmental problems as early as possible.

- **\$235 K: Delaware Readiness Teams** –There are 21 Delaware Readiness teams with over 350 volunteers in high-need communities working on school readiness, accessing quality early learning, early literacy, strengthening families and connecting them with resources, and Kindergarten transitions across the state. These funds support coordination, training, and facilitators for the teams.
- **\$418 K: Evaluation, Awareness and Program Support** – The budget includes \$200,000 for outreach to parents and providers, for ongoing evaluation of Delaware Stars, and to support the team that implements all the initiatives listed above.

According to decades of research, early learning is one of the best investments a state can make. Children who experience quality early learning programs start school more ready to succeed. They are healthier, more self-sufficient and less likely to enter the criminal justice system over their lifetimes. Young children from low-income families or with other risk factors benefit most – and Delaware has made tremendous gains in ensuring its vulnerable children have access to high quality early learning experiences.

Research demonstrates that high-quality early learning benefits children, families and communities; developing a future workforce and yielding one of the best returns on investment. When children get a great start in life, we all benefit. Economists estimate a 10 percent return on investments in high quality early education – in reduced health care, special education, incarceration costs, and increased productivity and tax revenues.

Delaware's early learning progress must be sustained if we are committed to raising outcomes for all young children and insuring future success for our state.

Thank you for your consideration of this important investment.