Professional Development for Early Childhood Educators

Professional Development as a Key Indicator of Quality
There is a direct relationship between teacher preparation and quality of early care and education for children. Research shows the needs of early learners are unique and that the best outcomes are achieved when teachers have adequate preparation. "In short, teachers with a bachelor's degree (BA) in early childhood education or a related field tend to have higher-quality classrooms." (Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, & Howes, 2002)

In addition, the lack of standards for early childhood educators and providers results in low wages. This, in turn, results in a high turnover rate in this workforce sector. Turnover rate is another key indicator of quality.

Alaska needs to break this cycle of low standards, low wages, and low quality. Providing opportunities for increased professional development is part of the solution to breaking the cycle.

Accomplishments in Alaska
- The University of Alaska has developed a statewide distance delivery program for early childhood degree and certificate programs resulting in access to rural Alaskans.
- In academic year 2002-03, 15.9% of Head Start teachers statewide had an AA degree or better. By academic year 2006-07, 42.6% held AA degrees or better.
- High quality training is available through Alaska's Child Care Resource and Referral Network including both face-to-face and interactive computer-based training programs, again, accessible to rural areas.

Continuing Challenges
- Alaska has no consistent standards of professional preparation for early childhood educators.
- The Head Start Reauthorization Bill recently passed by Congress includes guidelines for professional development, including that all Head Start teachers have an Associate's degree and that 50% have a Bachelor's degree. Alaska falls significantly short of this mark.
- It is difficult for individuals working full-time and earning low wages to afford the cost of education.

Resource Paper on Early Learning