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Executive Summary of the Commission to Develop a Strategic Priorities Plan for Maine's Young Children

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Executive Summary

Every aspect of this report was unanimous and bipartisan, a fact which underscores the urgency of the need for early childhood investment, and the Commission's commitment to that policy.

"Investments in quality child care and early childhood education do more than pay significant returns to children—our future citizens. They also benefit taxpayers and enhance economic vitality. Economic research—by Nobel Prize-winners and Federal Reserve economists, in economic studies in dozens of states and counties, and in longitudinal studies spanning 40 years—demonstrate that the return on public investment in high quality childhood education is substantial."[1]

The Commission to Develop a Strategic Priorities Plan for Maine's Young Children has concluded that investment in quality early care and education will yield significant benefits in the following areas:

- ***Brain development.*** The early childhood period from 0 to 5 years, and especially age 0 to 3 years, is the most critical period for positively impacting brain development and capacity for future learning.
- ***State economy.*** Investment in early care and education will yield short-term and long-term benefits for the state economy.
- ***State budget.*** Investing in Maine's youngest children will generate significant cost savings for the state budget.
- ***Return on investment.*** At 16%, the rate of return on investment in early care and education is exceptional.

These finding are substantiated by a compelling body of research spanning the disciplines of economics, developmental psychology and neurobiology. It has become clear to the Commission that investing in Maine's young children today will produce a strong and productive workforce that bolsters Maine's economic growth and prosperity, will result in lower government spending, particularly in the criminal justice system, and will yield strong financial returns for individuals and society at large.

Summary of Commission Recommendations

All recommendations of the Commission were unanimous and bipartisan, a fact which underscores the urgency of the need for investment in early childhood and the Commission's commitment to that policy.

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[1] Calman, Leslie J., Tarr-Whelan, Linda. "Early Childhood Education for All, A Wise Investment", Legal Momentum, April 2005. http://www.familyinitiative.org

I. Immediate Implementation

The Commission recommends the following initiatives and investments for immediate implementation and enactment through emergency legislation.

A. Create an Early Childhood Business Plan: Coordinating, Planning, Streamlining and Evaluating

- ***Establish the Office of the Child Advocate.*** The Commission recommends the establishment of the Office of the Child Advocate as an independent office of State government to provide ongoing, coordinated and systemic advocacy on behalf of Maine's young children: The office will conduct research and program evaluation, streamline and reduce duplication of services, consider the creation of an Early Care and Education Department and offer a children's budget report which synthesizes how the state budget affects children. With a constant eye on ensuring the best possible start in life for all Maine children ages 0-5 years, the Child Advocate will provide a strong and focused voice for Maine's youngest citizens.

- ***Establish the Children's Growth Council.*** The Commission recommends the establishment of a 24-member Children's Growth Council, modeled after the Maine Economic Growth Council, to recommend, maintain and evaluate a long-term plan for investment in Maine's young children to benefit children, families, employers, taxpayers and the state economy. The Task Force on Early Childhood initiative of the Governor's Children's Cabinet shall serve as the starting point and foundation for the Children's Growth Council, which will provide permanent home and ongoing state-level commitment to early childhood investment.

- ***Complete a comprehensive needs assessment.*** The Commission recommends that the State complete a comprehensive needs assessment of the early childhood system. The needs assessment will document the availability of and families' needs for early care and education; identify gaps and unmet needs and identify priorities for closing those gaps; and document the needs of the early care and education workforce.

- ***Conduct research to evaluate the impacts of early childhood investments.*** The Commission recommends the implementation of a long-term research project, performed by independent researcher under contract to the Office of the Child Advocate, to document the effects of public investment in programs and services to promote the healthy development of Maine's young children.

- ***Increase quality child care education scholarships for providers.*** The commission recommends increasing the amount of scholarship money available to child care providers to attain specialized early care and education training by $200,000 beginning in FY08-09 and raising the per-course and per-year scholarship limits.

B. Improve the Quality of Early Care and Education for Maine's Young Children

- ***Increase access to funding for quality improvements to child care facilities.*** The commission recommends reducing the interest rates for Regional Economic Development Revolving Loans for Day Care to 3%, simplifying the paperwork required to apply for this program and increasing awareness in communities regarding availability of this loan money for funding physical improvements to child care facilities.

- ***Unify incentives for quality child care under state child care subsidy policies and systems.*** The Commission recommends that the Department of Health and Human Services unify the policies governing subsidies provided via the Federal Child Care Block Grant and those provided under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program to increase incentives for quality child care.

- ***Support quality pre-kindergarten programs through a collaborative community-based model for program delivery.*** The Commission recommends creation of a framework to support communication and facilitate the development of locally designed comprehensive quality early childhood systems among pre-kindergarten programs through the establishment of community collaboration coaches.

C. Formalize Commitment to Family Strengthening

- ***Codify the State's commitment to universal home visiting.*** The Commission recommends codifying universal home visiting as a core service available to all Maine families with children, from the prenatal period through five years of age, subject to available funds.

II. Future Action

Beyond the investments identified above as priorities for immediate Legislative action and enactment, the Commission recommends an additional set of proposals be referred to the Child Advocate and the Children's Growth Council for review and action. Specifically, the Commission recommends that Child Advocate and the Children's Growth Council carefully review each of the following proposals and develop specific recommendations with regard to implementation, prioritization and funding for each idea:

- ***Invest in quality child care, Head Start and pre-kindergarten.*** Specific areas of potential investment include the Quality Rating System, Child Care Resource Development Centers, a quality investment bond, the Child Care Plus ME program, and child care licensing and programming standards.

- ***Invest in child care subsidies and funding for low-income families.*** Specific areas of potential investment include overall funding for the child care subsidy program for low-

income families, subsidies for quality care for infants and toddlers, subsidies for at-risk families and increased funding for Early Head Start.

- ***Invest in tax credits and financial incentives for quality.*** Specific areas of potential investment include amending the state income tax credit for child care expenses to provide incentives for higher quality care, particularly for low-income families, amending the employer-assisted child care tax credit to increase employer investment in child care, amending the quality child care investment tax credit, and establishing an endowment fund to create a public/private partnership to support early childhood investment.

- ***Invest in family strengthening.*** Specific areas of potential investment include an expansion of the home visiting program to reach 40% of first-time parents, an expansion of home visiting program to serve all communities in the state and the implementation of a family resource center pilot project to deliver comprehensive family support services in six sites.