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January 2004

From the Co-Directors:

In December Joe Landon, Assemblymember Wilma Chan's Early Childhood Education specialist in Sacramento, asked if I could come and speak to the committee designing and writing the legislation for AB 56, a proposal for universal pre-school in the state of California. Wilma Chan is backing the bill and wants to be sure that it truly addresses the needs of young children. Joe Landon also wanted the leaders of good programs to speak so that the committee would know what is already established in the field. He asked specifically that I outline the vision and philosophy that stands behind quality Early Childhood Education Childcare programs. I thought you might enjoy reading the talk I wrote to present on January 10th to the committee. If any of you have ideas or thoughts that would strengthen this presentation and further help the children and families in our state I'd love to hear from you. Call me, email me (claireb@aocsweb.org), or stop by.

Let me preface the talk with some thoughts and background on the subject:

- 1) This bill seems unlikely to pass in the current economic climate;
- 2) We feel we must make it very clear that pre-school is a unique learning stage which is very vulnerable to over-direction in the traditional form of elementary teaching, not a diluted kindergarten experience. Over-direction and adult interference in normal development has been shown to diminish and destroy successful academic achievement in later years.
- 3) A competing initiative sponsored by the California Teachers' Association and Rob Reiner (father of the Prop 10 tobacco tax for early childhood programs) is being qualified for next year's ballot. This proposes a new corporate tax, 2/3 of which will support K-12 programs and 1/3 to support a three-hour program open to all 4-year-olds on public school sites. The CTA can garner a lot of support for this initiative, but the early childhood component seems to have been added without much thought: most public schools don't have room to add pre-school, but the initiative doesn't fund construction; the public school affiliation holds credentialing, pay scale, and teachers' union implications;

the many non-public programs offering quality pre-school are left out; and families who need full-day care cannot take advantage of a three-hour program.

While I don't expect my comments to have immediate impact, I see this as an opportunity to educate the legislators towards the next round of bills. It is exciting to see the concept of pre-school for all children gaining credibility in many camps, and we hope that when it eventually comes to pass our thinking will be part of it. The Alameda County First Five Commission wrote some very good guidelines for universal pre-school in the county, some of which I have incorporated into the following talk:

With the creation of universal access to pre-school, we have the opportunity to do something wonderful for children and families. Every day teachers are being asked to educate children for a world that will be very different from the world they now live in. What will the new world ask of our children? What will our children need to know? Today we know so much more about children and how learning occurs than we ever have before. Our vision expands beyond existing educational systems, like those developed in the 1800s to teach children reading and writing and arithmetic. That school system was developed for children entering school around the age of six or seven, and was designed specifically to train the mind. Today we are thinking of a school readiness program for four-year-old children, and we know from recent brain research that learning occurs in a very different way in the pre-school years. The great minds in the field of early childhood would say that learning occurs in the gestalt of wholeness. The pre-school child's learning occurs in non-specific ways through every experience in the day, unlike the elementary school child's more developed and better organized mind which can compartmentalize and direct its learning. So the pre-school we create needs a curriculum that teaches to the wholeness of life, gently adding in the specifics needed for academic readiness.

Traditionally pre-schools were three-hour programs where children could learn to play together so when they got to elementary school they would pay attention to the teacher instead of playing with each other. 50-hour-a-week care was unheard of out of the home. When we began developing a pre-school, twenty years ago, where children from infancy to age five would be enrolled all-day-every-day, we realized how very serious the job was. Children learn every moment of the day; 5:00 in the afternoon is every bit as important as 10:00 in the morning. We asked ourselves, "How do we create a place where human life thrives? What kind of a world can we construct on the school site that communicates to the children at every age that they are wonderful learners, smart and kind and respected? How do we teach resiliency, self-esteem, curiosity, and a willingness to try?" We built a program focused on meeting the children where they are, knowing that by building trusting relationships with adults and peers we would facilitate their development toward elementary school readiness.

The creation of the Association of Children's Services (AOCs) was born of the desire to create a wonderful learning environment for young children and a healthy support system to strengthen the bonds of working families. We know that humans learn in the quiet moments when thoughts percolate up into an idea, not because someone has been deluged with information. Yes, we need

information in order to learn, but without the quiet time to process information collected in a way that builds on prior learning, the information is useless to the pre-schooler. Pre-school children need not only the verbal information but also to experience the information (to talk about a bug and to hold one in your hand are two very different things). So learning occurs when human beings are allowed to fiddle around, to experiment, to play. Through play the pre-school child links experience to thought, to words, to a sequence that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Feeling safe and relaxed, playing with the support of a trusted teacher's coaching, allows learning to occur. The chaos and stress of unsupervised play interferes with constructive learning in the pre-school years. Children in elementary school can manage such play because of the more mature social and language skills they developed on the foundation of pre-school social learning. In the same way, they are able to learn academically in more abstract ways because they have spent their early years learning through concrete experience.

The vision for the school began to take form from the parents' need for full time child care. The school must support the needs of families as well as the needs of the children. We added to our list of questions, "How do you build a strong family unit with long hours of separation? How can we show the children that the world they live in is full of beauty and wonderful surprises when they are in the same facility day after day, week after week, all year round?" As we consider the implementation of universal access to pre-school, we must also acknowledge that access to pre-school for the children of working parents depends on access to a full day of care as well.

At the heart of the Association of Children's Services (AOCS) is the children's school; hard-working parents enroll their children at the completion of their maternity leave, sometimes as young as six weeks of age, and children stay until they go to kindergarten. Six age-appropriate, thoughtfully designed classrooms with their adjoining yards make for graceful transitions from group to group as the children mature. For twenty years AOCS has offered full-day, quality care for families. Open from 7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. year round, we provide freshly prepared meals and home-made baby food, formula and cloth diapers, and adult-to-child ratios that support strong relationships. The children's long days dictate a subtle blend of nurturing and education; we know that for young children "care is education, and education is care." Throughout the day every child is trusted to make choices that meet his needs, from age-appropriate offerings. Some examples: The baby may choose a toy to chew or shake, or practice rolling over or cooing to a responsive adult. The toddler may choose to sit with a book, climb stairs and slide, push a cart, or dress up. The pre-schooler may choose to put a puzzle together, build a path for cars in the sand with a friend, swing on a rope swing, or work on writing a story. Allowing the children to choose over and over allows the children to understand who they are and how they fit into the world—the very foundation of a satisfying and successful life, and such individualized learning that each child must manage it himself. The elementary school system, where the teacher plots out each child's goals, doesn't work for pre-schoolers who are constructing a sense of self.

The school is a private non-profit funded by parent fees,

gifts, and grants. We do not receive state or federal funding. As the school grew, multiple associated services supporting the teachers, guardians, and parents of young children developed around the children's school.

I have told you about AOCS as an example of a pre-school which sends well-prepared children to public and private schools throughout the East Bay. As with most human services, there is no formula that makes it work. Rather, it developed through a thoughtful integration of academic knowledge, sensitivity to emotional needs, awareness of the context of family life in this generation, trust in children's innate ability to grow given proper support, and continuous monitoring to be sure the program meets the children's needs. We dream of a world where all children receive this preparation for life.

-Claire and Liisa

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Parent Education Events

The Parent Services Committee has planned three evening workshops for the spring—keep your eyes open for details! The topics to be addressed and possible dates are:

January event: College fund planning

February event: Balanced Scheduling of children's activities

March event: Sibling issues

The next meeting of the Parent Services Committee is scheduled for Wednesday, January 14 at 6 p.m., or contact chair Janet K. (Olivia's mom, callbackcom@earthlink.net) if you would like to participate in the planning!

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Spring Auction and Raffle

The Parent Fundraising Committee kicks off planning for the Spring Auction and Raffle at its meeting this month, January 6. Audrey Y. (Ben & Aidan's mom, audreygetr@yahoo.com) and Heidi J. (Hunter & Parker's mom, heidijhn@aol.com) are co-chairing the event, scheduled for Sunday, May 23. The first major tasks focus on soliciting items from local merchants and getting organized for the raffle. More helpers are always welcome!

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Board Report: Summary of the Meeting December 4, 2003

Announcements:

- Brett Stineman has been nominated to be the new Parent Representative on the Board, replacing Marcia Riley.
- The November/December issue of the Children's Advocate newsletter features photos of several AOCS families in their article about multi-racial families.

Programs committee

Proposals for NAC Spring 2004

Gail Myers presented three options for NAC's spring semester. The \$25,000 Soda Foundation grant covered the NAC shortfall for the fall semester. As demand now seems to be more for advanced classes rather than introductory classes, the schedule is being adjusted. Based on a comparison with other local colleges, the tuition per unit will be doubled from \$50/unit to \$100/unit. The comparison looked at the total cost to the student, including textbooks since all NAC classes include the textbooks. The budget assigns NAC a portion of AOCS overhead costs which may be high, and will be re-evaluated for next year's budget. NAC continues to be frustrated by Merritt College's unwillingness to accept AOCS (CSUH Extension) units; this does not impact the Spring Semester plans, but does have long term implications.

The Board acknowledged the value NAC brings to AOCS, including an increased level of professionalism in the childcare center staff, along with recognition of the excellence of the staff. NAC is a valuable tool in establishing our credibility as we try to raise the political consciousness around childcare issues. The NAC student population is very diverse and is in the mid-to-low income segment. NAC expands AOCS beyond "any other good daycare center." At the same time, it appears that NAC needs retooling for the future (ie, more of the highly successful weekend seminars), along with identifying the incremental cost of the program and how to fund it.

The Board then decided on which option to follow:

The suggestion was made to accept Option 3 with the specification that classes that don't meet minimum enrollment will be cancelled.

The Programs Committee was asked to come up with a long-range plan, including a marketing survey to ask different childcare centers what they need given Prop 10 funding and to identify what services NAC could provide. The long-range plan needs to address streams of support for NAC, the ideal portfolio of revenue/funding from tuition, outside grants, and AOCS subsidy (if any), the marketing effort required to support NAC and ensure its success, and how to convince Merritt College to make it their policy to accept AOCS credits.

Election of Officers

The new Board officers are:

Melba Wu, President
Linda Gardner & Seth Rosen, Co-Vice Presidents
Noelle Pillsbury, Secretary
Rik Hansen, Treasurer
Shiree Teng, Executive Committee At Large

Beyond the Curriculum video

The Board watched this new video which has been produced by NAC to further spread the AOCS philosophy into the world. This video, starring our sophisticated teachers Claire Bainer, Ameena Muhammed, and Janice Haywood, focuses on the relationships of teachers and children, and explains how that is really the root of the learning that goes on in early care settings. The video is being copyrighted and will

be sold for training uses.

—*Noelle Pillsbury's minutes summarized by Liisa*

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Thanks for the Staff Bonus!

Each year when the Parent Fundraising Committee puts out the request for a year-end bonus to the AOCS staff it seems unlikely that the gift can exceed the generosity of the year before...but so far it has, every year since we've been managing it. Each staff member ended the year with a wonderful vote of appreciation that made the week of rest also a week with substantial cash in hand. Thank you to all who contributed!

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Thank You for the Cleaning!

Thanks to Ma Leong, Ekwan Fang, and Maria Smith of the housekeeping staff for coming in over the break to do deep cleaning throughout the school. You may have noticed all the clean carpets! Thanks, too, to Claire Bainer for coming in to supervise replacement of toilets and flooring in the Nursery School, and to Jon V. (Jerrott's dad) for installing wainscoting.

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AOCS Anniversaries

We celebrate the following anniversaries for our staff in January:

Maru Perez-Viana at AOCS since 1998—6 years
Sheila Sumner at AOCS since 2001—3 years

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Comings and Goings

Welcome!

Alessandra H., parents Valerie W. and Maurice H., joins the Playroom.

Haley P., parents Connie G. and Danny P., joins the Infants.

Condolences to Billy Witz on the death of his father.

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Birthday Books

Numbers 123/Los Numeros 123, What Time is It?/Que Hora Es?, Opposites/Opuestos, Peekaboo Morning, and Nature board books from Ameena Muhammed

I Love You, Sun, I Love You, Moon from Esther Lara for the Wobblies

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