Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

October 12, 2010

The Honorable David Obey, Chairman
House Committee on Appropriations;
Chairman, Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education
2358-B Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jerry Lewis, Ranking Member
House Committee on Appropriations
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Todd Tiahrt, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education
House Committee on Appropriations
2441 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Obey, Ranking Member Lewis, and Ranking Member Tiahrt,

In this difficult appropriations year, we thank you for your support for high-quality early learning, including funding increases for Head Start and the Child Care and Development Block Grant. As the Fiscal Year 2011 appropriations process moves forward, we urge you to also strongly support the Early Learning Challenge Fund at the Senate Appropriations Committee's level of $300 million for Fiscal Year 2011.

For a generation, economists have documented the high return on investment from high-quality early learning programs – as high as $16 for each dollar invested. Eighty-five percent of brain development occurs before children reach age 5, so investing early helps close academic achievement gaps before students enter kindergarten. The research is clear. Students in high-quality early learning settings are less likely than their peers to require special education services, drop out of high school, commit crime, become teen parents, or become dependent on welfare later in life. As we work to cut our deficit, investing in high-quality early learning can make a major impact on our nation's long-term fiscal health.

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The most vulnerable young children are those in low-income families. Unfortunately, current funding levels allow less than half of eligible preschool children to participate in Head Start; only 4 percent of eligible infants and toddlers to participate in Early Head Start; and only one in six eligible children to receive CCDBG federal child care subsidies. Even in the general population, only 24 percent of four year olds and 4 percent of three year olds attend state-funded pre-K programs.

As you know, in February of 2010, President Obama's Fiscal Year 2011 budget supported a proposed version of SAFRA with $9.3 billion over 10 years for the Early Learning Challenge Fund. This systems-changing program will incentivize states to build a comprehensive, high-quality early learning system for children from birth through age five. The Early Learning Challenge Fund will promote an effective early childhood workforce; parental involvement; data-based decision-making; early learning standards; and a program quality rating system. The Early Learning Challenge Fund will provide supports for programs across all early childhood education settings, including Head Start, state-funded pre-kindergarten, IDEA Part C, Child Care and Development Block Grants, and other early childhood programs. The Early Learning Challenge Fund will leverage investments from state and local governments, philanthropy, and the private sector, with a focus on quality and alignment of infrastructure between and among these programs.

In September of 2009, the House passed H.R. 3221, the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act (SAFRA) to authorize the Early Learning Challenge Fund at $1 billion annually for 8 years. Despite bipartisan support for the Early Learning Challenge Fund, it was dropped from the final Health and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010 that was signed into law in March of 2010.

In July of 2010, the Senate Appropriations Committee passed its version of the FY 2011 Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education bill. This bill included $300 million for the Early Learning Challenge Fund for Fiscal Year 2011. As the Fiscal Year 2011 appropriations process moves forward, we urge you to fund the Early Learning Challenge Fund at the Senate's level of $300 million.

Sincerely,

Mazie K. Hirono
Member of Congress

Vernon J. Ehlers
Member of Congress

Don Young
Member of Congress

Howard L. Berman
Member of Congress

Rush D. Holt
Member of Congress

Fortney Pete Stark
Member of Congress

Steven R. Rothman
Member of Congress

Barbara Lee
Member of Congress

Todd R. Platts
Member of Congress

Judy Chu
Member of Congress

Jared Polis
Member of Congress

Jim McDermott
Member of Congress

Edolphus Towns
Member of Congress

Anh Cao
Member of Congress

Leonard L. Boswell
Member of Congress

Earl Blumenauer
Member of Congress

Jerry McNerney
Member of Congress

Donald M. Payne
Member of Congress

Gwen Moore
Member of Congress

Donna F. Edwards
Member of Congress

Raul M. Grijálva
Member of Congress

John A. Yarmuth
Member of Congress

Ruben Hinojosa
Member of Congress

Lloyd Doggett
Member of Congress

Keith Ellison
Member of Congress

Mary Jo Kilroy
Member of Congress

Lynn C. Woolsey
Member of Congress

Lois Capps
Member of Congress

Walter B. Jones Jr.
Member of Congress

Tammy Baldwin
Member of Congress

Albio Sires
Member of Congress

Michael M. Honda
Member of Congress

Elijah E. Cummings
Member of Congress

Jim Himes
Member of Congress

James R. Langevin
Member of Congress

Kendrick B. Meek
Member of Congress

Bruce L. Braley
Member of Congress

Yvette D. Clarke
Member of Congress

Alcee L. Hastings
Member of Congress

Steve Kagen
Member of Congress

Grace F. Napolitano
Member of Congress

Carol Shea-Porter
Member of Congress

Bob Filner
Member of Congress

Michael N. Castle
Member of Congress

Kathy Castor
Member of Congress

Steve Cohen
Member of Congress

Maurice D. Hinchey
Member of Congress

Dale E. Kildee
Member of Congress

Loretta Sánchez
Member of Congress

John F. Tierney
Member of Congress

Paul D. Tonko
Member of Congress

Laura Richardson
Member of Congress

Joe Courtney
Member of Congress

Dennis J. Kucinich
Member of Congress

Robert E. Andrews
Member of Congress

Dina Titus
Member of Congress

Gregory W. Meeks
Member of Congress

Eliot L. Engel
Member of Congress

Mike Thompson
Member of Congress

Jerrold Nadler
Member of Congress

Linda T. Sánchez
Member of Congress

Susan A. Davis
Member of Congress

Carolyn B. Maloney
Member of Congress

Doris O. Matsui
Member of Congress

Chris Van Hollen Jr.
Member of Congress

Carolyn McCarthy
Member of Congress

Marcia L. Fudge
Member of Congress

Gregorio Sablan
Member of Congress

Bobby L. Rush
Member of Congress

Barney Frank
Member of Congress

Ben R. Luján
Member of Congress

Phil Hare
Member of Congress

Louise McIntosh Slaughter
Member of Congress

Anna G. Eshoo
Member of Congress

Anthony D. Weiner
Member of Congress

Solomon P. Ortiz
Member of Congress

Eni F.H. Faleomavaega
Member of Congress

Shelley Berkley
Member of Congress

David Wu
Member of Congress

James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

Danny K. Davis
Member of Congress

Betty Sutton
Member of Congress

Alan Grayson
Member of Congress

John D. Dingell
Member of Congress

Corrine Brown
Member of Congress

John Conyers Jr.
Member of Congress

Silvestre Reyes
Member of Congress

Luis V. Gutierrez
Member of Congress

Robert A. Brady
Member of Congress

Gene Green
Member of Congress

Janice D. Schakowsky
Member of Congress

Jackie Speier
Member of Congress

William D. Delahunt
Member of Congress

Christopher S. Murphy
Member of Congress

Andre Carson
Member of Congress

Ron Kind
Member of Congress

John P. Sarbanes
Member of Congress

Nick J. Rahall II
Member of Congress

Edward J. Markey
Member of Congress

Joe Baca
Member of Congress

Wm. Lacy Clay
Member of Congress

John Garamendi M.C.
Member of Congress

Pedro R. Pierluisi
Member of Congress

Jane Harman
Member of Congress

Charles B. Rangel
Member of Congress

Sheila Jackson Lee
Member of Congress

Bob Etheridge
Member of Congress

Emanuel Cleaver II
Member of Congress

Richard E. Neal
Member of Congress

Henry A. Waxman
Member of Congress