

# Writing for the Legislative Audience

## NCSL Webinar—April 15, 2010

**Please read the following items before the Webinar. Each will be discussed during the Webinar, and you will be asked to respond with your reactions.**

### **Item 1—GoodStart Program**

*Read this analysis once. How clearly do you understand it?*

In fiscal year 2008, 2,924 licensed day care centers were in operation in the state. Through the Department of Social and Health Services, the state licenses and inspects all of these centers. The Department also administers GoodStart, a joint federal–state program that subsidizes day care for parents and guardians whose income falls below a state–defined level. For the past five years, this level has been fixed by state regulations at 150 percent of the adjusted federal poverty level. In all, about 61,500 children, most of them infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, received services in licensed day care centers, though only a small portion received GoodStart assistance. In fiscal year 2008, the Department paid about \$52.7 million in GoodStart supplemental payments for qualifying households. Licensed care centers are located throughout much of the state and range from small (1–2 children) operations conducted in private homes to large (150 children) operations conducted as franchise operations and as nonprofit centers in churches, specially constructed facilities, and rented facilities.

The Department is organized into four regulatory units with regard to services for infants and children. Personnel from the Bureau of Child Care Regulation are responsible for nearly all of the direct oversight on day care centers, including annual inspections of all facilities. In fiscal years 2007–2008, approximately 12 percent of licensed facilities failed to pass their inspections on the inspector’s initial visit. However, the Bureau was only able to inspect 70 percent of the licensed centers within the 1–year statutory time frame, in part because of shifting workloads and staffing shortages. Centers that do not pass receive two follow-up opportunities to demonstrate that deficiencies are corrected. Our analysis showed that most deficiencies relate to relatively minor health and safety issues (such as an insufficient first–aid kit) that can be corrected with limited effort. About 1 percent of all centers had their operating licenses revoked for failing to pass their follow–up inspections.

Inspection activities for child care centers are conducted through the Department’s three regional offices. These offices have personnel who conduct regulatory activities for two of the three other units providing services to infants and children. We found that on average, regional office personnel responsible for infant– and child–related activities spent about 43 percent of their time in child care facility inspections. This percentage has dropped, according to Department personnel, in part because of additional responsibilities related to domestic violence issues, which are coordinated with the Department of Public Safety. However, agency personnel were not able to provide an estimate of the decline in time spent on inspection activities because data by activity was not kept prior to 2005. This situation has lessened the amount of review activity for GoodStart. As a result of the backlog, the Department made a decision in February 2008 to make optional the part of the inspection dealing with verification of eligibility for GoodStart supplemental payments.

Verification of GoodStart eligibility during facility-specific inspections is not the Department’s only check on proper targeting of GoodStart funds. However, this particular population group is highly mobile, with federal studies showing that on average, recipients remain at the same day care facilities for fewer than 7 months. To receive GoodStart support, applicants must be screened through the Department’s normal eligibility process. Alone, this initial check is relatively ineffective in ensuring that funds are spent appropriately. We analyzed a sample of GoodStart payments at 23 facilities randomly selected throughout the state and found that on average, 37 percent of payments were for children who were no longer at the facility. This illustrates the problem in making verification optional.

## **Item 2—Power Grid Paragraphs**

*Which of the following paragraphs would you choose to send to a legislative committee asking for a brief analysis about the state's power grid?*

### Version A

The transmission system providing electric power within the state has sufficient capacity to meet current peak demand even if a main transmission line is out of service. If a line were suddenly to break down during a time of peak demand, no community would be seriously threatened with brownouts or blackouts. However, the state's growing need for electric power holds potential dangers for the system's integrity within the next 5-7 years. Such factors as rapid population growth, rising industrial demand, and aging transmission infrastructure would make the state much more vulnerable to brownouts or blackouts by that time. In a brownout, computers and other equipment sensitive to large voltage change could suffer damage, and in a blackout, homes and businesses would lose electricity completely.

### Version B

The state's growing need for electric power holds potential dangers for the integrity of the electrical transmission system within the next 5-7 years. The system providing electric power within the state has sufficient capacity to meet current peak demand even if a main transmission line is out of service. If a line were suddenly to break down during a time of peak demand, no community would be seriously threatened with brownouts or blackouts. However, such factors as rapid population growth, rising industrial demand, and aging transmission infrastructure make the state much more vulnerable to brownouts or blackouts in the future. In a brownout, computers and other equipment sensitive to large voltage change could suffer damage, and in a blackout, homes and businesses would lose electricity completely.

### Version C

The state's growing need for electric power holds potential dangers for the integrity of the electrical transmission system within the next 5-7 years. Such factors as rapid population growth, rising industrial demand, and aging transmission infrastructure would make the state much more vulnerable to brownouts or blackouts by that time. In a brownout, computers and other equipment sensitive to large voltage change could suffer damage, and in a blackout, homes and businesses would lose electricity completely. However, the transmission system has sufficient capacity to meet current peak demand even if a main transmission line is out of service. If a line were suddenly to break down during a time of peak demand, no community would be seriously threatened with brownouts or blackouts.

### **Item 3—Cost Center Paragraph**

*Read this paragraph once. What do you learn from it?*

For the purpose of receiving state aid, school districts report their costs in four categories, called “cost centers.” These costs are presented on a student-day basis, with two of the cost centers pertaining most directly to instruction. Basic instruction is the largest of the four cost centers, with about 62 percent of all costs. It consists primarily of salaries and benefits for teachers, aides, and others directly involved with the part of the curriculum defined in state law as “basic instruction,” but it also includes books, materials, and supplies related directly to these parts of the curriculum. Costs per student-day for this cost center averaged \$23.56 for school year 2009, a 5-year increase of 27.8 percent. Enhanced instruction, the other category pertaining directly to instruction, covers special education, counseling and guidance services, and extracurricular programs such as athletics and drama. The student-day cost for this category averaged \$5.32 for school year 2009, a 5-year increase of 14.5 percent. The two remaining categories, administrative support and physical plant, together constitute about one-fourth of the average student-day cost. Administrative support is the smallest category, with a student-day cost averaging \$2.28 in school year 2009. This amount has dropped by 5.1 percent over the past 5 years, the only category to show a net decrease. Expenditures in this category consist mainly of salaries and benefits for central office staff, building principals, and other building staff (exclusive of those not reported under one of the three other categories). The final category, physical plant, had an average student-day cost of \$6.84. This category consists of such expenditures as debt retirement, maintenance expenditures, utility costs, food service costs, and salaries and benefits related to custodial, security, food service, and similar staffs. Costs in this category rose 14.2 percent in the past 5 years, reflecting the emphasis on placing more money into instructional services.