

Recommendation **One**

Early Childhood

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**The
College
Completion
Agenda**
State
Policy Guide

Produced in Collaboration with:



NATIONAL CONFERENCE
of STATE LEGISLATURES

One

Provide a program of voluntary preschool education, universally available to children from low-income families

Two

Improve middle and high school college and career counseling

Three

Implement the best research-based dropout prevention programs

Four

Align the K–12 education system with international standards and college admission expectations

Five

Improve teacher quality and focus on recruitment and retention

Six

Clarify and simplify the admission process

Seven

Provide more need-based grant aid while simplifying and making financial aid processes more transparent

Eight

Keep college affordable

Nine

Dramatically increase college completion rates

Ten

Provide postsecondary opportunities as an essential element of adult education programs

Background

Children who enter kindergarten ready to meet its academic, social and emotional demands are more likely to achieve later success in school and life. Conversely, children who enter school behind and unprepared to meet these demands tend to remain behind and grow up at risk for harmful behavior in adulthood (e.g., dropping-out of school, criminal behavior, teen parenthood and unemployment).

There is evidence that more than half the achievement gap found in later school years is already present when children enter kindergarten and this disproportionately affects children living in poverty. When starting kindergarten, the cognitive scores of children from families with high socioeconomic status (SES) average 60 percent higher than those of poor children.¹ Children from low-income, disadvantaged environments have smaller vocabularies and are behind higher income peers in reading and math skills. There is little doubt that many children will be challenged to succeed in school and beyond, based on their lack of readiness when they walk into the kindergarten classroom. School readiness is malleable, however. Numerous programs have documented success in increasing school readiness at kindergarten and sustaining progress in later years. States can increase college readiness and success by intervening in the earliest years. No single early childhood approach is the best answer. State investments in these early years must be strategic and coordinated.

What Legislators Need to Know

In order to evaluate the condition of young children in their states and their readiness for school, legislators may want to seek answers to the following questions:

- Which children in the state are most at-risk for problems with school readiness, and where are they located?
- Where are early childhood programs located, and which children do they reach?
- What state agencies have responsibility for early childhood services, and how do they coordinate services?
- To what extent does the state provide or support the experiences and interventions known to increase the chance for academic success? Are there gaps?
- Where is the funding for early childhood services and how much is provided for different ages? For different types of programs?
- Which programs for children up to 5-years-old have the elements that will make them most effective, and which programs need improvement?
- How does the state evaluate program efficacy and child progress before school entry?

Research

Early child development significantly affects later student achievement.

We now know that both genes and experience shape brain development. Genes determine when brain circuits mature, which is why most children learn to walk at fairly predictable times. But a baby's experiences greatly influence how cognition, emotion and skills such as speech develop, which, in turn, further shape brain circuits. These interactions among genetic predispositions and early experiences not only affect the foundations of learning and behavior, but also of physical and mental health.

Recent research has shown that a child's early experiences can actually become embedded in the body and affect early learning and later academic achievement (in addition to adult problems such as stress regulation and heart disease). Developmental disparities between poor children and their peers can be seen in children by the time they are age 1, and even as early as 9 months. And, while poverty alone can increase the risk of poor development, a set of cumulative risks is even more threatening. A recent study of children in the child welfare system indicates that those with six or more risk factors (e.g., minority status, teen-aged caregiver) have a 92 percent chance of having a developmental delay; this increases to 99 percent for children with seven risk factors. While the family remains central to a child's development, mounting evidence about the factors that enhance or diminish long-term cognitive development and overall wellness gives policymakers more reason than ever to intervene early and comprehensively for those most at risk.

Effective early childhood programs and services make a difference.

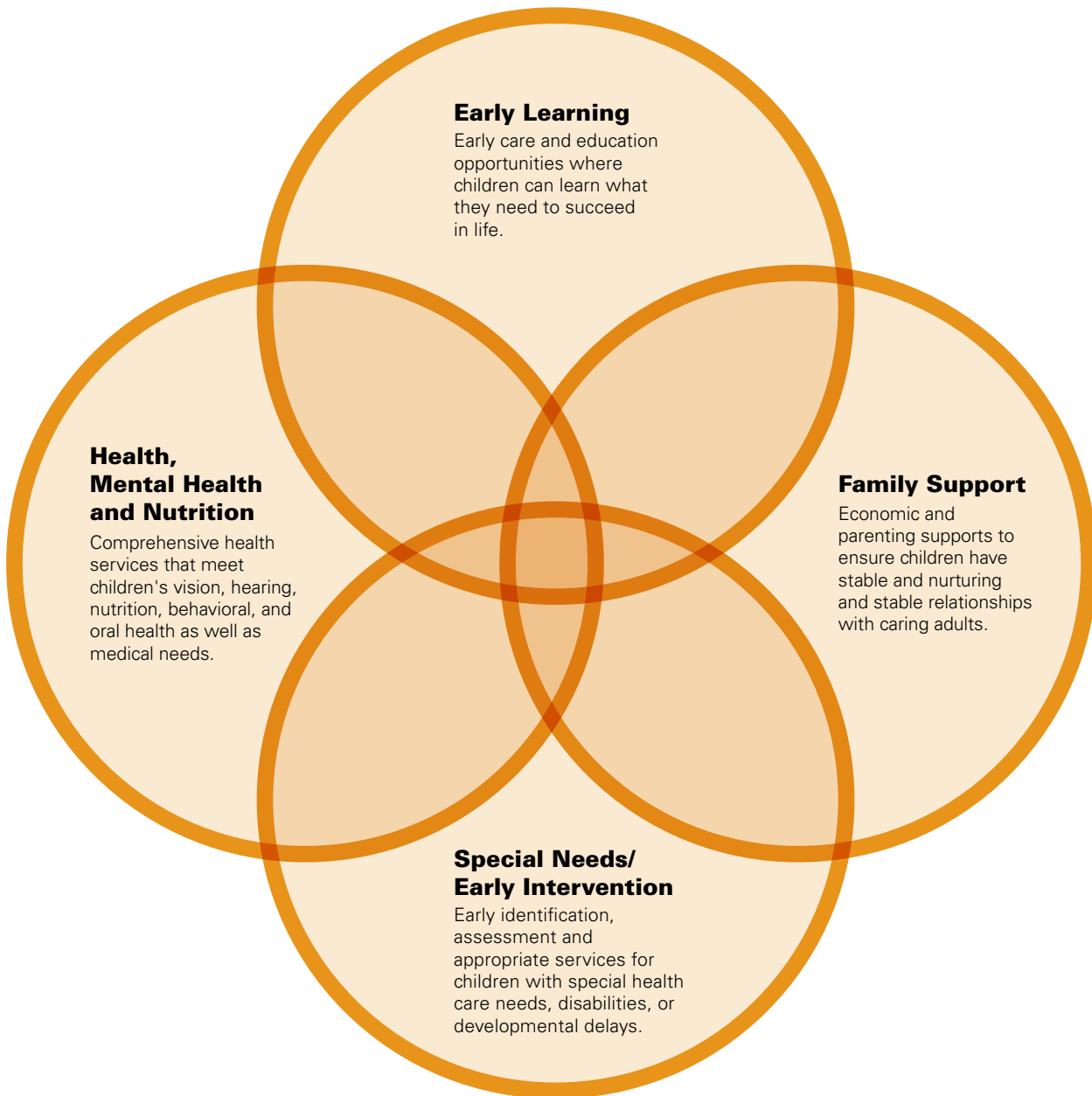
Some of the strongest evidence that early intervention can have an impact on school readiness comes from longitudinal research on prekindergarten or early care and education programs such as the landmark Perry Preschool and Abecedarian projects. Newer state-funded programs are showing strong results: A study of five state-funded preschool programs found significant improvements in language, literacy and math.

But prekindergarten alone will not ensure that the children who are most developmentally at risk will be ready for school and higher education. Instead, a system that supports children from birth to age 5 must be strategically tailored around different populations of children and parents. For example, effective child care is essential: Research has shown that children in better care settings have scored higher on fifth-grade vocabulary tests than those who received lower quality care. A recent five-city study of Educare Centers, which provide full-service child care and education, revealed that the at-risk children in these centers had school readiness scores nearly equal to national averages (96.7 percent compared to 100 percent). Children with more exposure to Educare — those who joined between birth and age 2 — had scores 9 points higher than the national average.

Other programs also make an impact. Home visits that support new parents, early intervention for children with developmental delays, and mental health concerns and initiatives to prevent environmental threats such as exposure to toxins and poor nutrition show success in targeting vulnerable children. Most states are administering a variety of state and federally funded programs for some of their youngest citizens — some with proven results and some with only anecdotal support. Some programs serve many (e.g., prekindergarten for all children at 200 percent of poverty level), while others are more appropriate to certain populations of children (e.g., children born with low birth weight).

Figure 1. State Early Childhood Development System

Source: Early Childhood Systems Workgroup



Among the many options for children through age 5, the most effective programs provide:

- Qualified and appropriately compensated personnel;
- Responsive, warm and developmentally appropriate interactions between adults and children;
- High adult–child ratios and small group sizes;
- Safe and language-rich environments; and
- Developmentally appropriate curriculum.

More children will be ready for success when they walk through the kindergarten door if we understand the effect of programs on children and families and coordinate programs to maximize results.

Effective early childhood strategies are multifaceted.

Because many individual, family and community factors may delay a child’s development and readiness for school, it is necessary to consider a comprehensive approach to early childhood services that includes different strategies. The national Early Childhood Systems Working Group developed the following framework (Figure 1) to help guide state efforts (other states have developed similar frameworks).² The framework addresses early needs of children in learning, health and mental health, special needs, and family support. Services to support these areas include:

- Child care;
- Preschool;
- Economic and parenting support;
- Health and dental care and vision services; and
- Early identification and intervention of infants and toddlers with disabilities.



OH

State Policy Approaches



Low Cost

Coordinate governance for greater alignment from birth to age 5.

States are beginning to coordinate agencies and oversight across services (prekindergarten, child care) and along the birth to age 5 range. A single coordinating agency can enhance the quality of services and the results for children, and maximize investments by ensuring that services are coordinated and aligned.

Ohio established the Family and Children First Cabinet Council to help families seeking government services by streamlining and coordinating resources. In 2006, HB 289 added responsibilities to the council, including selecting indicators in order to measure progress toward improving children's well-being, developing an interagency system to monitor progress and developing a plan for state-level interagency efforts. In 2007, Ohio also established the Help Me Grow Advisory Council, an interagency coordinating council that advises the Ohio Department of Health about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C. (Part C provides early intervention services for children with developmental disabilities or delays.)

Connecticut Senate Bill 941 (2009) established the Office of Early Childhood Planning, Outreach and Coordination within the Department of Education. It is responsible for planning, developing and coordinating the delivery of services to children up to age 9. This includes an early childhood data system and development of an early childhood accountability plan in conjunction with the state's Early Childhood Education Cabinet. The cabinet includes legislators; representatives from the departments of Education, Social Services, Public Health and Mental Health; and representatives from other agencies that provide early childhood services. The cabinet is charged with coordinating services among state agencies as well as among public-private partnerships.

A 2003 **Illinois** Act (Senate Bill 565) established the Illinois Early Learning Council to coordinate, improve and expand upon existing early childhood programs and services. The purpose of the council is to implement early childhood efforts and initiatives; develop a multiyear plan to address gaps in capacity and quality; reduce policy, regulatory and funding barriers; and collaboratively plan and coordinate across programs, divisions and agencies at the state level. Legislation in 2008 (HB 4456, Act 95-781) created the Commission on Children and Youth to develop a five-year plan for services for children from birth through age 24.



Coordinate workforce training and professional advancement ladders.

Training for early childhood providers should, along with two-year or four-year degrees, include a clear way to increase further qualifications and professional advancement.

Connecticut (2004, SB 517) coordinates the training of child care and early childhood educators by including public health, social services and higher education in all planning decisions. Staff receive training, career counseling and scholarship assistance. In addition, agreements that coordinate classes and requirements between two-year and four-year degree programs and common program accreditation help a student achieve higher levels of education across various types of early child care and education programs.

Montana's Early Childhood Higher Education Consortium, established without legislation to enable consistency in higher education course work and training across the state, includes higher education articulation agreements between four-year institutions and tribal and community colleges. In addition, local outreach sites administer a Child Development Associate credential, for which the course work credits may also be applied to a college certificate or to an associate or a bachelor's degree in early childhood education.



Measure early childhood program quality.

Defining essential and optimal standards for all early childhood programs can help them improve. One approach many states have taken is a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). These systems provide standards such as high staff-to-child ratios and minimum qualifications for providers, which help less effective programs improve.

Pennsylvania's Keystone STARS (Standards, Training and Professional Development, Assistance, Resources and Supports) began in 2004, after a successful 2002 pilot. More than 5,000 providers receive ongoing technical assistance through the voluntary system, which includes five levels of quality evaluated by curriculum, teacher qualifications and parent engagement. Higher quality programs receive more compensation. One-quarter of participating programs received the highest quality rating in the 2007–2008 fiscal year.

Washington Learns, the state's initiative to review the education system with the goal of creating a world-class seamless system, recommended establishing a Quality Rating and Improvement System in 2007. Senate Bill 5828 (C 394 L 07) established a voluntary QRIS for child care and early education programs. Administered by the Department of Early Learning in collaboration with a public–private partnership, the department began a six-county pilot of the system, Seeds to Success, in July 2009. Communities will evaluate which elements of the system already exist to some degree in the county (e.g., provider training) and explore how various elements of the QRIS impact child development.

In operation for more than a decade, **North Carolina's** five-star rating system, the Star-Rated License, is considered one of the most established systems for child care and early learning providers. All licensed programs in the state enter the system with a Star 1 designation; higher rated programs are rewarded through higher reimbursement rates for services. Star ratings are determined by program standards (e.g., child–staff ratio and measures of child–adult interactions) and staff education standards. The T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood project (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps) encourages staff to get further education by providing scholarships for course work that leads to degrees or credentialing in early childhood education. T.E.A.C.H. is a national model established in 21 states.

**Medium Cost****Track readiness.**

Data systems can be expanded so they provide information to evaluate child risk levels, program access and duplication of efforts, and to determine whether interventions are working for children. If early childhood data systems include unique child and provider identifiers, they can link to K–12 student and teacher information. The data systems can help evaluate children’s readiness for K–12 education in different areas (e.g., social-emotional, literacy). Tracking readiness throughout early childhood is the best way to understand how various programs support the highest level of child development.

Maryland uses a revised version of the Work Sampling System (WSS) observational assessment for all kindergarten children that complements the state’s early learning standards, Maryland’s Model for School Readiness (MMSR). The results are published annually in a statewide readiness report, which includes information by county/school district and for subgroups of children, as well as for four types of early childhood experiences (e.g., family child care, Head Start). Data also are used to guide curriculum and planning and to communicate children’s strengths and weaknesses to their parents.

In **New Jersey**’s state-funded prekindergarten and kindergarten programs, children receive an assessment tied to the curriculum three times a year. This state-developed tool assesses oral language and literacy skills and children’s skill development. Student progress is evaluated through a combination of teacher ratings and anecdotes about a child’s skills, a literacy activity and child work samples. Teachers conducting the assessments are given significant training and use the results to guide their classroom instruction. In addition, annual state evaluation visits to at least one-third of the state’s prekindergarten programs validate the programs’ self-assessment of state quality standards.

Pennsylvania is embarking on an ambitious effort to assess all children from birth to age 5 who receive state-funded early care and education services annually. The state will use Pearson’s Work Sampling System for 3- to 5-year-old children and the Ounce Scale Child Development Tool for younger children. This assessment is one part of the state’s Keystone STARS quality improvement initiative.



KS

**High Cost**

Retool funding.

States are developing a stable funding source for birth to age 5 services with appropriate funding for children through age 3. Block grants allow communities the most flexibility to support specific gaps in needs and services.

In 2008, **Kansas** (HB 2946, Chap. 184) instituted an \$11 million early childhood block grant program administered by the Children's Cabinet. The money will be used to support evidence-based programs for at-risk children in underserved areas, with a minimum of one-third of the funds specifically for infants and toddlers.

Nebraska, in 2006, established an Early Childhood Education Endowment (Bill 1256) to fund services for at-risk children from birth to age 3. Earnings from a \$60 million public-private endowment are used for the programs. A 2006 constitutional amendment allocated the public funds from state perpetual funds dedicated to schools. A board of trustees administers the program with competitive grants awarded to school districts in partnership with community programs and agencies.

A long-time leader in this approach, the **Illinois** legislature in 1997 enacted the Early Childhood Education Block Grant (Public Act 89-397, 105 ILCS 5/1C-2) to support prevention programs, prekindergarten, parent training and other services for children from birth through age 5. Using state general fund revenue, the block grant combined money for numerous early childhood programs into one funding stream. The competitive grants distribute funds to a variety of entities, including school districts. In addition, 11 percent of the funds are specified for at-risk children age 3 and younger.



Target early prevention services.

States may want to target effective programs to those children who are most in need as well as increase efforts such as prenatal care, home visiting programs, and early identification and intervention services for children with developmental concerns that can later prevent more costly issues. For families most at risk, states can develop a wide array of necessary services, including health, mental health, home visiting programs, and good quality care and education. Not all families need all services, so a systemic state approach to understanding and addressing family needs can maximize limited resources.

Iowa's Community Empowerment, now known as Early Childhood Iowa, was established in 1998 (SF 2406) to provide a variety of community services and supports to young children, particularly in the critical ages from birth to 3. The legislation created Community Empowerment Area Boards to administer funds from the state departments of Education, Human Services and Public Health. Through a community assessment of needs, services and gaps in care for children from birth to age 5, local boards target funds to meet the following goals:

- Increasing school readiness skills;
- Improving the health of young children;
- Decreasing child abuse and neglect;
- Developing more adult–child mentor relationships;
- Getting parents more involved; and
- Increasing access to quality child care.

This initiative tracks program measures (e.g., number of quality child care programs) and child measures (e.g., immunization rates) every year.

Take Action

1

Ensure legislators are included at the table of state and federally supported coordination efforts, including:

- State P–20 education councils, legislative children’s caucuses and children’s cabinets.
- Federally required state early childhood advisory councils (ECACs), now being formed in states that will advise state policymakers on creating comprehensive systems for children from birth to age 5.
- Ongoing efforts resulting from State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems grants, funded by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau.

**Short-Term**

2

Bring together legislators focused on K–12 and early childhood to evaluate coordination in the earliest school years, from early childhood through third grade, and assess child transitions through high school.

**Short-Term**

3

Develop a framework that communicates the state vision for a comprehensive approach to early childhood. Include specific and measurable child, family and service-level actions and results; and use these to rank policy and other actions. Articulate any necessary changes in the state’s current services so together they can work toward achieving that vision.

**Short-Term**

4

Set goals for children (e.g., percentage of children ready for school) and complete a plan for tracking and publically reporting annual progress.

**Short-Term**

5 Conduct a state scan of programs and services. Look for reach of programs, differences in eligibility and use of services, and duplication of services or goals. Analyze regulatory friction between programs and funding streams that prevents seamless coordination.



Mid-Term

6 Evaluate and prioritize resources for:

- Percentage of children ready for kindergarten, by income level or other demographic factors (e.g., English Language Learners).
- Percentage of children eligible for services and percentage actually enrolled in programs such as Head Start or home visiting programs.
- Location of highest quality child care programs and an evaluation of their accessibility for children in very poor neighborhoods.
- Distribution of early childhood programs and family supports in communities that most need the services.



Mid-Term

7 Assess the use of birth to 5 services by surveying a random sample of families with multiple risks. Evaluate their knowledge of, eligibility for, and use of these services.



Mid-Term

8 Remove barriers by simplifying applications for multiple services, establish an early childhood hotline for information, and develop strategic outreach and communication to at-risk communities, including encouraging providers to help families submit applications.



Mid-Term

9 Scan state data systems. How many systems are tracking providers, programs and children? What is tracked and what data are actually analyzed? What are the technical differences between these systems?



Mid-Term

Take Action

10 Complete memoranda of understanding with all public and private services for child data and other operations-sharing information.



Mid-Term

11 Evaluate, track and publicize data for major at-risk indicators for children age 5 and younger. Use this data to make informed decisions about policy, practice and funding.



Mid-Term

12 Ensure that all early childhood data systems can work together and with the state's K-12 data system.



Long-Term

13 Regularly review goals and evaluate how policy is supporting children's progress.



Long-Term

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Notes

1. Similar gaps exist by race and ethnicity, but these gaps largely disappear when family poverty level is considered.
2. The Early Childhood Systems Working Group included representatives from the Alliance for Early Childhood Finance, The Build Initiative, The Children's Project, Center for Law and Social Policy, National Center for Children in Poverty, National Conference of State Legislatures, Smart Start National Technical Assistance Center, State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network, and Zero to Three.

State Legislatures and the National Conference of State Legislatures

Background on the National Conference of State Legislatures

The National Conference of State Legislatures is the bipartisan organization

that serves the legislators and staffs of U.S. states, commonwealths and territories.

NCSL provides research, technical assistance and opportunities for policymakers to exchange ideas on the most pressing state issues, and is an effective and respected advocate for the interests of the states in the American federal system. Its objectives are:

- To improve the quality and effectiveness of state legislatures.
- To promote policy innovation and communication among state legislatures.
- To ensure state legislatures a strong, cohesive voice in the federal system.

The conference operates from offices in Denver and Washington, D.C.

For further information, visit www.ncsl.org.

Background on the College Board

The College Board is a not-for-profit membership association whose mission is to connect students to college success and opportunity. Founded in 1900, the College Board is composed of more than 5,700 schools, colleges, universities and other educational organizations. Each year, the College Board serves seven million students and their parents, 23,000 high schools, and 3,800 colleges through major programs and services in college readiness, college admission, guidance, assessment, financial aid and enrollment. Among its widely recognized programs are the SAT[®], the PSAT/NMSQT[®], the Advanced Placement Program[®] (AP[®]), SpringBoard[®] and ACCUPLACER[®]. The College Board is committed to the principles of excellence and equity, and that commitment is embodied in all of its programs, services, activities and concerns.

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For further information, visit www.collegeboard.com.

Background on the College Board Advocacy & Policy Center

The College Board Advocacy & Policy Center was established to help transform education in America. Guided by the College Board's principles of excellence and equity in education, we work to ensure that students from all backgrounds have the opportunity to succeed in college and beyond. We make critical connections between policy, research and real-world practice to develop innovative solutions to the most pressing challenges in education today.

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