

Early Care and Education:

Policy Considerations for Ensuring High-Quality Pre-K Programs

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Interest in early care and education (ECE), also referred to as early childhood education, has escalated in recent years. The interest is bipartisan, as evidenced by the multiple ECE-related bills already introduced by the 113th Congress. Further, 39 states have implemented prekindergarten (pre-K) programs. In 2013, 27 governors mentioned ECE in their State of the State Addresses, and 15 of those proposed pre-K program expansion (Mead, 2013). Nationwide attention to ECE and pre-K programs increased significantly after President Obama's 2013 State of the Union Address when he announced plans to expand pre-K programs and take a step towards universal pre-K in all states. This announcement has caused skeptics and supporters alike to take a closer look at the necessity of pre-K programs and what role they play in a child's future success.

Early childhood programs are deemed important because they provide the child with a foundation of cognitive, social, and emotional skills upon which new skills are continually built, resulting in greater academic and societal achievements. Studies have illustrated that appropriate interventions during early years can have a significant impact in narrowing future achievement gaps (Barnett, 2013; Demma, 2010; Duncan & Sebelius, 2013; ECDC, 2011; Education Commission of the States [ECS], 2013; Heckman, 2008; National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2011; National Governor's Association [NGA], 2012). ECE programs can help close the achievement gap, promote higher levels of success throughout an individual's lifetime, and ultimately generate a return on investment for taxpayers that is too high to ignore (White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2013).

The federal government has promoted the importance of ECE and the expansion of pre-K programs through grants such as Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) and the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). RTT-ELC funds integrate high-quality ECE systems and ensure that any ECE assessments used conform to the recommendations of the National Resource Council's reports on early childhood. The District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and 35 states applied for the grant in 2011 by developing ECE reform proposals; 18 of these RTT-ECE applicants have also submitted plans for reforms in K-3 that aim to sustain the effects of ECE programs. By 2012, 14 states received RTT-ELC awards: California, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, Washington, Colorado, Illinois, New Mexico, Oregon and Wisconsin (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2013).

CCDBG is a federal law enacted in 1990 to provide states with the financial assistance to provide child care and fund quality child care initiatives. The law primarily aims to give low-income families access to quality child care, and simultaneously facilitate parents' participation in the workforce, school, or job training programs. To receive funding, states must submit a two-year plan outlining eligibility criteria, state priorities in children served, sliding fee scales, provider payment rates, and specific quality improvement initiatives. In FY2012, CCDBG received discretionary funds of \$2.278 billion and mandatory funds of \$2.917 billion. This law is among the many education bills that are long overdue to be reauthorized. Advocates aspire to receive equal, if not greater, appropriations for FY2013 (Lynch, 2012; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013).

Best practices for pre-K programs can be derived by analyzing ECE data and evaluating pre-existing pre-K programs. This brief will address those best practices and provide five necessary program areas for fostering a successful, high-quality ECE system. These include: coordinated ECE governance, standards alignment between ECE and K-12, professional development needs, ECE program assessments, and coordinated longitudinal data systems (Barnett, 2013; Demma, 2010; Early Childhood Data Collaborative [ECDC], 2010; ECDC, 2011; NAEYC, 2011; NGA, 2012).

Cultivate Coordinated Governance

Coordination, open communication, and other collaborative strategies will keep various stakeholders informed of one another's objectives and reduce the risk of creating policies that lead to wasted resources and misaligned goals and practices. Experts from multiple fields are needed to adequately provide services in physical and mental health, special needs, family and community involvement, and early interventions. Education leaders should also strive to coordinate decisions and policies across grade levels. Failing to do so may result in children falling behind as they move from ECE to early elementary grades. Additionally, as resources and funds become increasingly limited, policymakers need to allocate them carefully. A coordinated system unified in its goals, strategies, and resource allocation can efficiently expand the framework of successful ECE programs, resulting in improved school readiness and overall better developmental outcomes (Barnett, 2013; Demma, 2010; NAEYC, 2011; NGA, 2012).

One way to facilitate coordinated ECE governance is through the establishment of an early childhood advisory council. Usually established by the governor or other state leaders, this council can provide statewide recommendations on ECE data systems, professional development needs, and research-based early learning standards. An advisory council, or other appointed state leaders, focuses on statewide ECE issues and assists local systems with becoming more engaged in broader state plans (Demma, 2010; ECDC, 2011; NGA, 2012).

Some states have created ECE program offices to promote coordinated ECE governance. Current effective administrative systems show that ECE program offices should be centralized and not isolated or limited to one realm of education or student well-being. An ECE office with access to the multiple departments that play a role in student life, such as the department of education, department of human services, and the department of public welfare, can facilitate enhanced communication among these departments and promote service delivery. An aligned education system will also have more significant long-term effects because it will enable educators to reinforce and build on children's development as they progress from infancy to preschool to kindergarten and beyond (Demma, 2010; NAEYC, 2011; NGA, 2012).

State Activity

- North Carolina's Department of Education created an integrated Early Learning Office (ELO) in 2010 that not only administers ECE programs, but also helps align policies and practices from pre-K through grade three. The ELO is developing formative assessments that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) as well as the non-academic domains emphasized in the state's early learning standards. The office collaborates with the Department of Education and the Department of Human Services to facilitate discussion on school and district transformation, K–12 curriculum and instruction, and to assist with integrating and overseeing state and federal funding for pre-K programs (NGA, 2012; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2013).
- Wisconsin created the Governor's Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) in 2007. The council resulted from combining multiple ECE agencies that had previously worked in the state. The ECAC ensures all populations in Wisconsin have access to high-quality ECE programs and services. The ECAC also conducts statewide needs assessments, facilitates the collaboration and coordination of federally funded and state-funded ECE programs and services, provides recommendations for increasing ECE enrollment, develops outreach programs to underrepresented and special populations, and provides recommendations on statewide professional development and career advancement for ECE professionals (NIEER, 2013; Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2013).

Align ECE and K–12 Standards

Standards provide clear goals and timelines for education stakeholders. Setting high standards promotes greater consistency among ECE programs as well as greater continuity between pre-K and elementary grades and beyond. By outlining expectations, standards also help highlight professional development needs, shape classroom curriculum, and guide assessments. In order to set high yet achievable goals, standards should be derived from what is known about children's learning processes, reiterating the importance of data-driven decision making. Research-based decisions will ensure that age appropriate goals are set, and student proficiency can be accurately measured (Demma, 2010; Howard, 2008; NAEYC, 2011; NGA, 2012).

Many states are now adopting the CCSS in their K–12 classrooms; therefore, efforts to align pre-K classrooms with K–12 education will also have to consider the CCSS. ECE experts worry that CCSS curriculum content is too restrictive and focuses too heavily on English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics and not enough on social and emotional development and non-academic domains of learning. When aligning standards and determining ECE curriculum, it is critical that decisions are guided by research-based best practices and that the benefits of unique ECE characteristics are protected. Aligning ECE standards with early elementary standards and with the CCSS is important to establish a pre-K through grade 12 continuum, but ECE best practices should not be sacrificed in trying to conform pre-K classrooms to elementary-level classrooms (Demma, 2010; Duncan & Sebelius, 2013; Heckman, 2008; Maxwell, 2013; NAEYC, 2011).

The standards' effectiveness is strengthened when education leaders have access to relevant data and the training to understand the data and how it can be used to enhance practices and policies. This reiterates that ECE and K–12 systems need to be collaborative to ensure that elementary educators are equipped and prepared to sustain and build upon the gains made in pre-K programs. Enhanced alignment between the two systems is necessary to prevent achievement gaps from reappearing and to minimize the waste of resources (Demma, 2010; ECDC, 2010; Heckman, 2008; NAEYC, 2011).

State Activity

- Massachusetts' Department of Early Education and Care and the Executive Office of Education collaboratively developed the pre-K–12 Curriculum Frameworks in 2011 to link K–12 curriculum with pre-K learning guidelines. The state's education offices focused on making pre-existing pre-K learning standards the central foundation when developing CCSS-aligned pre-K learning guidelines. The offices also produced subject-specific crosswalks that guide pre-K instructors in planning and evaluating curriculum to ensure students are prepared for CCSS content upon entering kindergarten (Massachusetts Executive Office of Education, 2013; NIEER, 2013).
- Washington incorporates non-academic domains, such as social and emotional development and approaches to learning, into the state's K–3 standards, as well as the CCSS. The Early Learning and Development Guidelines, produced in 2005 and revised in 2012, outline developmental and learning benchmarks for different stages of development from birth through grade 3 and ensure that K–3 learning expectations support the standards of ECE programs. The Guidelines were a collaborative effort by the Department of Early Learning, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction Thrive by Five in Washington, representatives from Head Start, the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program, parents, tribes, and ECE and K–12 leaders (NGA, 2012; NIEER, 2013; Washington State Department of Early Learning, 2010).

Coordinate Professional Development for a Skilled Workforce

Aligning pre-K with early elementary grades requires coordinated teacher training. Developmental gains made in pre-K should be carried into and supported through the early elementary grades. Elementary teachers should therefore be trained in pre-K practices to be able to recognize these gains, foster progress and help prevent the positive effects of pre-K from diminishing early (Barnett, 2013; Demma, 2010; Heckman, 2008; NAEYC, 2011; Rasicot, 2012; Sawchuk, S., 2013).

Pre-K professionals will also benefit from age-sensitive, ECE-specific training. Teachers directly engage with the students on a daily basis, and consequently have a significant influence on their development and academic success. The teacher is responsible for creating a stimulating environment, utilizing the tools and teaching methods proven to have the greatest impacts, and determining the overall quality of interaction a child receives while in the classroom. The instructor who knows how to implement best practices and identify when a child is struggling to meet age-appropriate developmental milestones will be able to adjust lesson plans accordingly and give each child the opportunity to make optimal progress (Demma, 2010; Duncan & Sebelius, 2013; ECDC, 2011; Heckman, 2008; Rasicot, 2012; Sawchuk, 2013).

It is important that teachers and administrators have access to data and are trained to understand the data guiding education reforms. Understanding the data that motivates education strategies and policies will provide educators with a more comprehensive appreciation of how their work affects the academic system and each individual student. Professional development practices illustrate that when a professional understands why a certain standard or expectation is in place, he or she is more willing and able to meet that standard (Demma, 2010; ECDC, 2011).

Including pre-K in the academic continuum requires a shift in the public's schema of pre-K. Pre-K professionals should not be perceived simply as babysitters, but as skilled professionals responsible for shaping a pivotal learning period in a child's life. Pre-K professionals may soon be required to have the same credentials as K–12 professionals, such as a bachelor's degree and a teaching certificate, and in turn should be offered comparable salaries. States implementing such changes have already seen higher recruitment numbers and lower turnover rates of ECE professionals (Barnett, 2013; Rasicot, 2012; Sawchuk, 2013).

State Activity

- Oklahoma requires all pre-K instructors to have a bachelor's degree and an early childhood certificate and be paid the same salary as K–12 teachers. In 2007, the state further supported teacher effectiveness by passing a law maintaining a low student-to-teacher ratio of no more than ten-to-one. The Oklahoma Center for Early Childhood Professional Development webpage provides access to continued professional training opportunities and contains tools and resources to help ECE instructors create effective learning environments, such as early learning guidelines and handbooks (Blagg & Tepe, 2013; ECS, 2013; NIEER, 2013; Oklahoma Center for Early Childhood and Professional Development, 2011)

- Connecticut developed professional learning platforms such as coaching and online forums in 2011. These methods aim to support professionals with CCSS implementation and to help kindergarten teachers analyze Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA) results so they can better support students' pre-K gains. Connecticut's ECE program funds also support "Training Wheels," which provide training sessions and on-site coaching on the use of the Connecticut learning standards and assessment framework. By 2015, the state will require lead teachers in all pre-K classrooms to have a bachelor's degree. In response, many of the state's institutes of higher education are revising or creating degree programs specific to ECE (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2013; NGA, 2012; NIEER, 2013)

Develop ECE Program Assessments

States will have to continually evaluate and assess program and teacher quality and preparedness to ensure pre-K programs are high quality and that standards are sufficiently and effectively aligned. Unlike K–12 education, the progress of pre-K students cannot be accurately measured by written tests. Many cognitive abilities that are equally important in promoting academic success are overlooked when using IQ or achievement tests (Heckman, 2008). An age-appropriate assessment system was one vital requirement of the RTT-ELC application. States were required to design and implement a common statewide, tiered quality rating and improvement system (QRIS).

QRIS is an observational tool that measures classroom quality and student progress. A QRIS can come in a variety of forms but must maintain five essential components, including a definition of quality standards, a process for monitoring standards, a process for supporting quality improvement, provision of financial incentives, and the dissemination of information about program quality and the steps taken to improve or maintain it. QRIS gauges the quality of an ECE program through a rating system, similar to the star system used for restaurants and hotels, and then ties incentives, such as technical assistance, to those ratings to encourage program improvement. Ratings are typically based on observation of the learning environment and the determination of whether policies that promote quality services are in place. Measurements are obtained through observation by a trained third party as well as through the collection and review of administrative data and program documents. States, districts or schools can tailor their QRIS system to meet specific needs such as aligning, monitoring, and technical assistance for multiple programs; promoting higher professional standards; or creating a gradient of progress for certain program characteristics (QRIS National Learning Network, 2013; Stoney, 2012).

State Activity

- New Mexico is currently phasing in QRIS by requiring it of all programs receiving state funding. In 2012, the state incorporated minimum licensing requirements into QRIS standards and plans to continue raising the licensing bar as more ECE providers reach a star level. New Mexico is also taking QRIS standards to new depths to include a child observation and assessment curriculum planning process as well as a deeper focus on cultural competence (Stoney, 2012).
- Ohio's QRIS maintains the high quality of ECE programs. As of 2011, programs cannot reach a star level unless ECE professionals meet all degree requirements, have aligned curricula, and establish a form of developmental screening. These standards create a cross-system approach that links to the child care licensing system, data collection, and monitoring. Ohio intends to streamline program administration and increase access to professional training and technical assistance by using automated QRIS support systems (NIEER, 2013; Stoney, 2012).

Prioritize Coordinated Longitudinal Data Systems

As with other key components of an effective ECE policy strategy, coordinated longitudinal data systems emphasize coordinated and collaborative efforts between ECE stakeholders to share data and communicate analyzed results. Poor data coordination and communication between stakeholders can result in failure to provide all necessary academic and human services to certain populations. Just as ECE instruction is multidimensional, ECE data measures multiple domains to garner a comprehensive picture of all the complexities at work in early childhood development. ECE data measures academic performance, physical and mental health, special needs, early interventions, and family support services (Demma, 2010; ECDC, 2010).

The cause-and-effect relationships illustrated by a variety of dependent and independent variables tracked over a period of time provide policymakers with an idea of which variables play the greatest role in development and school readiness, which have the greatest impact in improving programs, and which provide professionals with the tools and support they need. Data will also reveal which limitations of these programs are having the greatest negative impact and what changes in strategy can be made to address those areas of weakness. When states establish a database, each student should be assigned a unique identifier. By tracking students, progress can be followed across programs, districts, and state agencies. Databases that effectively provide comprehensive information link key data elements and bridge all education and ECE stakeholders. While data should be shared and all education stakeholders need access to the data to be valuable contributors to the education reform discussion, all personal information and student-specific data should remain classified (Demma, 2010; ECDC, 2010; NGA, 2012).

State Activity

- Colorado was awarded a \$17 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education in 2010 to establish a statewide longitudinal data system. The system aims to link the federally funded and state-funded ECE programs to the state's pre-existing K–12 education data system. Each student has been assigned a unique database identifier. The state is taking measures to match a child's identifier from various ECE data systems to his or her identifier being used in the K–12 data system. Enhanced tracking allows Colorado to evaluate program variances across the state, measure statewide proficiencies and progress, and evaluate the academic progress of any individual student (ECDC, 2010).
- Maryland implemented a longitudinal education data system in 2007 that includes an assessment of school readiness administered to all public school kindergarteners. Because the information is disaggregated by the type of ECE program, and because the database uses unique identifiers, this assessment allows the data system to measure outcomes of various ECE programs and reveals how kindergarten readiness correlates with academic success in the early elementary grades (ECDC, 2010; Maryland State Department of Education, 2012).

Policy Issue	Questions for Policymakers to Consider
Review existing ECE policies to ensure high-quality, sustainable programs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What ECE programs currently exist? Are local, state, and federal resources currently available for existing or new programs? 2. What demographic populations are currently served by ECE programs within the community or state? What are the barriers to access for all? 3. What data is available to guide the criteria for high-quality programs? Who decides the criteria? 4. Are children prepared to enter kindergarten? What tools are available to track and measure program improvement?
Cultivated coordinated ECE governance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Who should be included in ECE governance? What are the goals, concerns, and contributions of each stakeholder? 2. How knowledgeable are stakeholders about ECE? 3. Can an ECE advisory council or specialized program office be created? What agencies and offices would need to be involved with this council? What personnel and funding are available to staff this initiative?
Align ECE and K-12 standards	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What similarities and differences currently exist between ECE and K–12 standards? 2. What data, pedagogical, and professional development considerations exist when adding ECE standards to build a pre-K–12 pipeline? 3. How do these standards align with CCSS?
Coordinate professional development for a skilled workforce	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the current requisite qualifications for ECE educators? What additional qualifications are desired to enhance programs? 2. What professional support is currently available? What professional supports do current ECE programs need? 3. Is funding available for additional ECE professional development opportunities?
Develop ECE program assessments	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What goals and incentives exist within the assessment system? 2. What priorities should be measured and evaluated? 3. How do ECE assessments align with K–12 assessments and what program changes can be made to enhance the impact ECE has on K–12?
Prioritize coordinated longitudinal data systems	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What data systems are currently in place? How can new data systems be linked to any preexisting data systems? 2. Who has access to education data? How can access be enhanced? What training opportunities are available to help professionals understand and analyze data? 3. Are unique identifiers currently being used?

Recommendations

Policymakers should coordinate and collaborate with ECE experts when discussing ECE strategy

- Include a multitude of experts to cover the multidisciplinary nature of ECE
- Allow strategies and decisions to be driven by research and data
- Ensure all stakeholders have access to relevant ECE data
- Maintain open communication and share goals and strategies so that resources are not wasted and practices are not misaligned

ECE policies should include support systems and learning opportunities for ECE professionals

- Ensure teachers and administrators have access to ECE data and understand the significance of that data
- Ensure ECE professionals are trained in best practices and receive training in any new emerging best practices
- Provide support and incentives for continuing education requirements
- Ensure early elementary professionals are trained to identify and foster any benefits gained in pre-K
- Ensure pre-K and early elementary professionals are trained to identify developmental benchmarks and have the resources to create interventions for students who are failing to meet those benchmarks

ECE systems should align pre-K standards and K–12 standards

- Identify the similarities and differences in standards for each system
- Allow the data to guide age-appropriate standards
- Allow best practices to be shared across systems
- Consider how the CCSS standards align with pre-K as well as K–12 standards
- Protect ECE curriculums from becoming too constrictive when aligning with K–12 standards
- Include the development of age appropriate assessments in policy reforms
- Provide clear goals and incentives for these assessments
- Train pre-K and K–12 professionals to understand what these assessments are measuring and how those outcomes are significant
- Use disaggregated information to gain a more detailed picture on specific program types or districts
- Evaluate how ECE assessment outcomes are relevant to early elementary grades

Policy reforms should include the development of coordinated longitudinal data systems

- Move from snapshot data to longitudinal data
- Ensure all education professionals have access to this data
- Ensure all education professionals are trained to understand and analyze this data
- Use unique identifiers to track statewide progress as well as individual student progress
- Continually reevaluate what the data is telling us about education policy and practices
- Keep all student data classified

Early Childhood Education services at McREL

Our expert educators and researchers help schools, districts, and state systems evaluate and develop ECE curriculum, instruction, standards, assessment, and professional development. For more information, contact McREL at 1.800.858.6830.

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