



# ISSUE BRIEF

## INVESTING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

### BACKGROUND

Research proves that quality early childhood education programs help improve children's school readiness and can help close achievement gaps that exist among children even before they enter school. Research also finds that children who participate in high-quality programs demonstrate greater interest in learning, are less likely to repeat a grade or require special education classes, and are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college. For every dollar invested in prekindergarten programs, the return can be as high as \$16, making it both smart education and economic policy. States have recognized the benefits of early childhood education and as many as 38 fund preschool for three and four-year-olds. However, only about 20 percent of all four-year-olds and just three percent of all three year-olds nationally are actually enrolled in preschool programs.

Since 2006, NSBA and its Center for Public Education have collaborated with the Pew Charitable Trusts/Pre-K Now to engage school boards in support of high quality, voluntary pre-kindergarten education. Through partnerships with state school boards associations to promote greater access to voluntary, high-quality pre-kindergarten programs is the belief that such programs will propel schools' efforts to raise student achievement and close achievement gaps.

The 2009 *Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll* on attitudes toward public education shows strong support for early education – particularly in public schools. In fact, five out of ten Americans believe preschool programs should be housed in public schools, with parents even more supportive of that idea.

### RECENT LEGISLATIVE AND EXECUTIVE ACTIONS

Representative George Miller (D-CA-7) introduced the *Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2009* (H.R. 3221) in June 2009, which in part creates the Early Learning Challenge Fund (ELCF). The ELCF is funded at \$1 billion annually from 2010 – 2017 and creates two new competitive state grant programs: 1) Quality Pathways grants for states to increase the number of disadvantaged children birth-through-five in high quality early learning programs, and 2) Development grants for states to develop the components of an early learning system and become eligible for a Pathways grant. Both are jointly administered by the Secretary of Education and Secretary of Health and Human Services. The legislation was developed in close collaboration with the Obama administration. A Senate version is under development.

Final priorities for \$4.35 billion in Race to the Top funds encourage states to include early education in their applications. Two priorities in particular encourage inclusion of early childhood:

- Invitational Priority 3 - Innovations for Improving Early Learning Outcomes includes practices, strategies, or programs to improve educational outcomes for high-need students who are young children (pre-kindergarten through third grade) by enhancing the quality of preschool programs. Of particular interest are proposals that support practices that (i) improve school readiness (including social, emotional, and cognitive); and (ii) improve the transition between preschool and kindergarten.

#### OFFICE OF ADVOCACY

- Invitational Priority 5 - P-20 Coordination, Vertical and Horizontal Alignment – includes how early childhood programs, K-12 schools, postsecondary institutions, workforce development organizations, and other state agencies and community partners will coordinate to improve all parts of the education system and create a more seamless preschool-through-graduate school route for students.

Invitational priorities don't add extra points to state applications, but are a clear indication of the Department's interest in early education as a part of the state's overall reform strategy.

Focused legislation, such as the *Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation (LEARN) Act* also integrates early education as a vital part of the P-12 continuum. The LEARN Act (H.R. 4037/S. 2740) would authorize \$2.4 billion annually for states and LEAs to provide instruction, assessments and professional development for ages birth–grade 12 that is both scientifically valid and developmentally appropriate.

While the LEARN Act is pending in Congress, a first step toward comprehensive literacy was funded in the FY 2010 appropriations bill, allocating \$250 million for a new literacy initiative from pre-K through grade 12 to help struggling students build their literacy skills and improve the integration of reading initiatives across the Department of Education.

High-level coordination in the Executive branch contributes to a culture of support for early educating. For example, Education Secretary Duncan appointed a new senior advisor for early learning – Dr. Jacqueline Jones – in July 2009. This is the first time that early learning policy has been centralized and coordinated at such a high level in the Department. Dr. Jones is instrumental in conducting an inter-agency collaboration with the Department of Health and Human Services with six topic areas including curriculum, assessment, and data for early education.

## **NSBA POSITION**

NSBA urges Congress to expand access to and funding for high-quality, voluntary pre-kindergarten programs for all three and four year-olds, to create a new federal grant program, such as the Early Learning Challenge Fund, that will increase funding to develop, expand, and enhance the quality of voluntary preschool programs.

NSBA urges Congress and the administration to ensure that federally-funded preschool programs adopt developmentally appropriate early education standards that are aligned with state K-12 academic content standards and to foster collaboration between K-12 and early education providers to ensure that their programs are reflective of the expectations of local schools; devote specific resources to helping school districts develop and implement joint training and professional development programs for P-3 instructors, and provide tools and incentives to replicate effective models and improve program quality. This could include assistance with data systems integral to coordinating early education services across sectors and agencies.

*For additional information, please contact Lucy Gettman, director of federal programs at the National School Boards Association, at 703-838-6763, or by e-mail, [lgettman@nsba.org](mailto:lgettman@nsba.org).*