



Ensuring a bright future for every child

Start Early: Invest in the Youngest Learners

Leading for Equity: Opportunities for State Education Chiefs

Council of Chief State School Officers / The Aspen Institute Education & Society Program

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Many low-income students and students of color are already academically behind their peers when they start kindergarten. A developmentally-appropriate, high-quality early learning experience aligned to standards uses play to help prepare young children to learn. State chiefs can make the case that equity requires expanding and targeting access to high-quality early childhood education (ECE) programs, and closing opportunity gaps for children growing up in low-income families; this is a critical strategy for improving the quality of K-12 education with a high return on investment.

Specific actions may include:

1. Advocate for increased funding for more children to attend high quality pre-K.

Additional pre-K slots can be set aside specifically for:

- low-income families (gradually increasing poverty eligibility levels);
- three- and four-year old students zoned for under-performing K-12 schools;
- dual language learners/English learners;
- students in neighborhoods with a dearth of affordable slots, based on community mapping.

2. Provide state funding, via formula or competitive grants, to improve the quality of publicly-funded pre-K programs tied to quality standards, and target areas with highest need. With this funding, pre-K programs, districts, and schools offering pre-K can:

- reduce staff-to-child ratios and lower class size;
- increase salaries to accompany increased education/degree requirements for ECE teachers;
- provide hearing, vision, and dental screenings and services;
- extend the pre-K program day;
- strengthen and foster school and family connections through additional programming; and
- provide additional teacher professional development and training.

SEAs should monitor how increased funding helps recipients meet their goals related to expanding and improving high-quality pre-K programs, including allocating classroom slots to low-income students and English learners. SEAs can also provide information to grantees on best practices, technical assistance providers, and program evaluation.

- 3. Align pre-K/early learning standards to K-3 standards and provide professional development for pre-K and elementary school educators.** The transition from pre-K to elementary school is a critical time for young learners, which SEAs can help facilitate. This can include engaging early childhood educators in developing and aligning education standards to guard against “push-down” of instructional practices that are not developmentally appropriate for young children. States can also ensure early learning standards cover multiple domains including social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development, and partner with other state agencies if early learning programs are not housed with the SEA.
- 4. Modify suspension or expulsion policies for children in early childhood education programs and primary grades.** SEAs should analyze data on trends in suspension and expulsion rates by race, income, and age and train early childhood educators on developmentally-appropriate behavioral interventions to ensure educators can manage their classrooms without resorting to exclusionary discipline practices. School discipline policies should account for student time spent outside of the classroom and seek to reintegrate students as quickly as possible. SEAs can determine the resources necessary for LEAs and schools to develop educators’ expertise on social-emotional development in the early grades, and emphasize how investments in this area could help reduce teachers’ dependence on exclusionary discipline practices for your children.
- 5. Prioritize trainings and resources on cultural and linguistic services for the early grades.** In some communities, the pre-K population is far more diverse--culturally and linguistically--than the K-12 student population; certain communities are experiencing rapid levels of growth amongst their youngest learners and thus need more resources targeted to those students. States may also consider giving flexibility to LEAs to assess their own needs and utilize resources accordingly.
- 6. Engage in partnerships with related state agencies or divisions to ensure alignment across all programs.** The SEA can coordinate with health and human service agencies to implement a home-visiting program or other ECE interventions, or work with the state library division on early literacy initiatives.