Policy Brief

Early Learning

Education Commission of the States • 700 Broadway, Suite 1200 • Denver, CO 80203-3460 • 303.299.3600 • Fax: 303.296.8332 • www.ecs.org

Emerging Issues 2006

By Mimi Howard

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Introduction: The Status of Preschool and Kindergarten Programs in States Today

Over the past decade, investing in early learning programs for young children – especially at the pre-K and early elementary levels – has emerged as a central strategy in states' efforts to improve educational achievement and opportunity. This trend has been fueled by strong public support and a steady stream of research findings on the influence of the first few years of life on cognitive and emotional development, social adjustment, health and economic self-sufficiency.

Early education holds and will continue to hold a key place in state policy. Paradoxically, increased political and public support, while creating important educational opportunities for young children, has also raised new challenges and questions for those charged with creating and implementing policy. The need to close a persistent achievement gap, and ensure both long- and short-term returns on investments in early learning, has led to a growing focus on establishing policies and practices that will have the biggest impact on whether or not early learning programs pay off.

As early learning expands, so does the multiplicity of programs and accompanying infrastructures, policies and procedures, funding streams and accountability mechanisms. Policymakers are grappling with the challenges of accommodating existing programs and services while at the same time maintaining some uniformity of quality, outcomes and coordination across programs. And, with the imposition of term limits and the exponential growth of early learning research and development, there is a continuous need for policymakers to have access to up-to-date, easily consumable information that can inform their decisionmaking.

The Education Commission of the States (ECS) recently conducted analyses, interviews and a survey for a study designed to identify the most pressing early learning issues facing policymakers. The goal was to hear both from those who are faced with making decisions and from those who are on the ground conducting research and developing programs. To that end, this report reflects both a policy and program perspective on emerging issues for early learning. The study included: a review of all early learning legislation enacted in states in 2005,[1] an analysis of governors' 2006 State of the State addresses,[2] a review of a 2005 survey of ECS commissioners, and interviews with both issue-specific national experts and state policymakers.

Findings indicate that policymakers will or should be increasingly focused on the following emerging issues:

- Sustaining program expansion and appropriately directing funds
- Strengthening the coordination, alignment and governance of programs and services for young children
- Making more purposeful, productive use of accountability and assessment mechanisms
- Ensuring quality – program and personnel
- Engaging parents.

This policy brief reviews these five key issues and related challenges faced by policymakers and identifies pertinent questions for which policymakers will need answers. These issue areas do not co-exist

as separate and independent issues that can be tackled in isolation from other contributing factors, however, for the purpose of this review, they are presented and discussed separately.

Current and Emerging Challenges, Issues and Policy Options

Issue One: Sustaining Program Expansion

Understanding benefits and best investments

Sustaining program expansion depends on strong public and political will. In this regard, two issues emerged: (1) the need for better understanding of the benefits of early learning, and (2) the need to discern how to use the dollars most effectively. There is strong consensus that all policymakers may not yet fully grasp the power and potential of early education in terms of improving school readiness, and continued exposure to new research findings is essential to maintaining support.

Lawmakers need access to clearly articulated information on the short- and long-term benefits of early education that can inform their policy decisions. In addition, they need information and guidance on how to most effectively direct funds – especially where resources are limited and allocation decisions must be carefully weighed. A debate frequently arises over the question of investing heavily in program quality or spreading funds as widely as possible to increase access to programs. Disseminating information and providing access to the latest research on specific early learning program components and their impact on student outcomes will help policymakers decide which programs to support and where to target limited dollars.

Where to Invest: pre-K and full-day kindergarten – what are the tradeoffs?
- The rapid expansion of state-funded pre-K services has raised concerns that policymakers may lock into one program model without considering other options that may be more appropriate within a state or local context. Further, the focus on pre-K for 4-year-olds has left many educators and advocates fearing that programs and policies supporting children birth to 3 years will be overlooked.
- More and more private and community-based early learning programs are being tapped to provide state-funded services. Policymakers need information on identifying, evaluating and coordinating public/private service delivery.
- With many states expanding access to pre-K and full-day kindergarten, weighing the benefits and costs of early learning programs – and the tradeoffs between programs – is a hot topic. States and districts attempting the pre-kindergarten/kindergarten balancing act do not have a framework for evaluating decisions and developing implementation strategies. Further, some policymakers may need information on the unique and educationally significant aspects of full-day kindergarten that distinguish it from half-day programs.

Policy questions
- How can the resource-allocation "philosophy" of lawmakers be influenced to understand the critical role and value of early care and education?
- How can the importance of early intervention for long-term social and economic payoffs be best communicated?
- What are the most promising delivery models for early learning within various state contexts?
- Which combinations of pre-K and kindergarten programs should be available? For which student populations? How can programs be phased in?
- What are the unique program and funding issues related to full-day kindergarten that lack policy support? How can they be addressed in policy?

Issue Two: Coordination, Alignment and Governance of Programs and Services

Aligning P-3/P-12

Alignment of pedagogy and practice PK-3: The creation of a continuum of instructional practices and policies from pre-K through 3rd grade is considered an important strategy for strengthening the academic foundation of early learning and countering a historic conception of "fade-out" reported in the research. Issues that have not been fully addressed in policy include the alignment of standards, curriculum and instruction, and assessment across the pre-K-K-3 divide; professional development and support for teachers and administrators; evaluation of PK-3 programs; identification and implementation of supportive

school policies; and governance and management across systems. Further, policymakers could benefit from information gathered through studies that assess the impact of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) testing at grade 3 on early childhood education practices and policies.

Alignment of policies: Many see a need to incorporate pre-K policy into the work currently underway to improve and update K-12 standards and instructional practices. As state-funded pre-K programs expand and new policies are created, policymakers and educators must begin a process of aligning these policies with existing K-12 policies. The challenge will be to preserve the developmental integrity of early learning policies and practices while authentically aligning them with a K-3/K-12 framework.

Governance structures and systems alignment

The need to identify workable policies and procedures for service coordination continues to be an issue. Historically, early learning policy has focused on the creation of initiatives and programs that solve immediate problems, with funding coming from a variety of different sources. The result is a patchwork of diverse programs, each with its own infrastructure and no overarching policy framework encompassing a whole system of care and education. State school-readiness initiatives need to be well coordinated with early education programs, and also should build connections across other systems of care that affect well-being and school readiness.

Solving the issues of governance would clarify other policy concerns with regard to financing and accountability for programs. Policymakers need the tools and resources to develop comprehensive policies to coordinate and align early learning programs and services. Several approaches to creating workable governance structures are underway in several states. Resources and information on experiences and lessons learned could be invaluable to others as they attempt to devise appropriate structures within their state context.

Policy questions

- What tools, information and processes do decisionmakers need to support the alignment of policies and procedures across systems, agencies and levels of operation?
- What models for governance structures are currently being implemented? With what results?
- What are some of the inventive approaches states are taking to create overarching governance structures? What are the policy implications of these approaches for other states?
- What structure works best within diverse state contexts and what is the best approach to creating state-specific governance structures?
- How can we integrate pre-K program, teacher and child learning standards into K-12 standards?
- How can gains made in pre-K and kindergarten be sustained in the early grades? What state policies can support P-3 alignment?

Issue Three: Assessing Student Progress and Holding the System Accountable

Assessing student outcomes

The debate on how best to assess child outcomes and meet the accountability needs of policymakers, the developmental needs of young children, and the instructional needs of teachers is ongoing and sometimes contentious. Decisions regarding appropriate assessment are further complicated by the need to address differences in individual children as well as specific populations of children. Many feel that unless policymakers have a strong basic understanding of how young children learn, what good early education environments and instruction looks like, and the expected and appropriate outcomes for children, it will be difficult for them to understand and accept those assessment methodologies that are considered most appropriate for young children. To that end, policymakers need concrete examples of appropriate learning activities; frameworks of academic/developmental standards accompanied by resources and examples; and guidelines and recommendations for appropriate assessment methodologies for young children.

With regard to tracking outcomes across programs and over time, policymakers will also need access to data that span pre-K through early elementary school years. Further, some indication of how assessments are aligned with and reflect learning standards and expectations would enable policymakers to more authentically evaluate whether accountability measures are valid indicators of outcomes.

Assessing specific populations

Meeting the cultural and linguistic needs of an increasingly large segment of the population is becoming a critically important issue in many states. Providing policymakers with information on appropriate diagnostic and assessment tools for English language learners in particular is key to being able to focus more precisely on the needs of all learners. Also, educators are beginning to examine how best to assess children age 3 and under being served in state and federally funded programs.

Identifying appropriate indicators

There is growing consensus that the use of risk-indicator data for accountability purposes and for measuring child well-being is inadequate and should be supplanted with other, more authentic indicators, such as children's assessed developmental level. Policymakers need information and access to indicators that are true rather than proxy measures of status and they need to be able to track and monitor children's developmental status program by program and state by state. Finally, these data are not readily available in parent-friendly formats. Policies and practices that would make data available and usable by families is needed.

Policy questions

- How should culturally sensitive tools be developed to assess strengths and needs, and plan appropriate instruction for the many linguistic and cultural groups represented in preschool programs and schools today?
- How can policymakers be more effectively informed of the developmental needs and capacities of young children and learn about examples of best practices?
- How can assessment be used not only to address accountability but also to inform and improve instructional practices?
- What are some authentic indicators for measuring children's developmental status?
- What assessments are in place for pre-K and early elementary years? How are they aligned with learning standards?

Issue Four: Improving Program and Personnel Quality

Improving program quality

Due to the diversity of programs delivering early learning services in states, policymakers are challenged to create mechanisms that assure consistency of quality across programs. Three strategies are emerging.

Quality-rating systems. A growing number of states are initiating quality-rating systems as a means of assuring quality across multiple service-delivery models. For many, simply providing intervention and support to raise program quality is not sufficient. Policymakers need the latest research and data on quality-improvement strategies, costs and outcomes, as well as information about what other states are doing and learning about the implementation process.

P-3 and "ready schools." The P-3 continuum mentioned above also has implications for program quality. A number of "ready schools" initiatives focus on key P-3 components: transition, professional development, curriculum and instruction, assessment and leadership. Creating strategies for effectively supporting a P-3 agenda will require strong policy development addressing both structural and process quality.[3]

Accreditation and regulation. With the release of the new National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation system, states have the opportunity to use this system as a mechanism to assure uniform program quality.

Improving personnel quality

With rapid pre-K expansion, program administrators are turning to local Head Start agencies, public and private preschools, day care centers, and home and family childcare to provide services. Levels of provider education and experience across this spectrum are uneven. Policymakers are looking for direction on how to assure personnel quality across programs. Current and emerging strategies include:

Workforce development/teacher qualifications. Because teacher education level is known to have a direct impact on child outcomes, many programs now call for a baccalaureate-level teacher in every classroom.

The early learning community is rapidly approaching an impasse where there will virtually be no teachers with appropriate qualifications available to deliver services. (One state study projected that it would take at least 19 years to populate all preschools with degree-holding teachers.)[4] To begin building policies to support a high-quality workforce, policymakers need access to data on what states are doing with regard to professional development policy, models of recruitment and training, salaries and incentives, and certification and regulation across all service delivery models. Some experts feel that careful review and analysis of policies and practices for both pre- and in-service programming for early educator training will be necessary to ensure not only the preparation and induction of qualified individuals entering the field of early education, but also the appropriate support and training of those already in the field who are being asked to raise their qualifications.

Home-based care, licensing and training. The National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRA) estimates that nearly 69% of all children under age 6 are cared for in non-center-based facilities. Some are state-licensed, but many more are not and are classified as "exempt." Beyond regulatory issues, bringing education and training to this population of "family, friend and neighbor" caregivers is important for children and for the schools that will receive them when they enter kindergarten or 1st grade, and may be an area where policy could support other efforts.

Policy questions – program quality
- What successes and challenges are occurring in states implementing quality-rating systems? What kinds of policies must be in place to support statewide systems?
- What is the new NAEYC accreditation system and what role should it play in policies developed to assure quality across programs?
- What policies must be in place to support quality improvement beyond licensing at one end of the quality continuum and accreditation at the other?
- What polices must be in place to support the creation of a P-3 continuum in districts?

Policy questions – personnel quality
- How can a process for raising teacher qualifications be created? What are some successful approaches?
- What professional development mechanisms are currently in place in states (career ladders, articulated systems, scholarships) that could inform new policy?
- What state licensing and certification requirements exist in statute?
- How do the early learning guidelines in each state align with the teacher quality guidelines across delivery systems?
- What policies and practices should be in place to support the development of skills and knowledge for home-based care providers?

Issue Five: Increasing Parent Engagement

Approaches to parent involvement
The biggest concern voiced by policymakers was how best to authentically and consistently engage parents in their children's education, and how best to communicate data on school readiness and associated risk factors to parents.

Engaging cultural and linguistic populations
The national experts and policymakers interviewed for the ECS study felt the need to engage parents in specific cultural and linguistic populations was of highest importance. Reflecting research that ties parent support for learning to positive child outcomes, the need to engage parents in their children's education was seen as a strategy for boosting achievement and performance for those children who historically have been most at risk for school failure. Some voiced concerns over new immigration policies under consideration and what impact they might have on engaging already hard-to-reach populations of parents. Policymakers need information on the importance of parent engagement for later school success as well as examples of best practices for outreach and implementation of meaningful parent engagement strategies.

Assessing effectiveness
Parent involvement is a component of many pre-K and K-12 education initiatives. Often, however, efforts never get beyond the stage of establishing goals to planning how to measure progress. As state

readiness initiatives are created – all with parent involvement components – and NCLB requirements for measuring effectiveness of parent involvement programs in schools are implemented, states and educators will need assessment tools. Researchers must examine the role of various parental involvement components in student achievement. As findings become available, they will provide information on what policies to implement and how to do so.

Policy Questions

- How are policies put in place that support parental involvement in children's education? What tools and resources must be available to educators to help them engage parents?
- Are there ways to "incentivize" involvement that are not punitive?
- Are there ways of restructuring teacher roles and responsibilities or employer benefits for parents that allow for more out-of-classroom teacher time or parental leave options?
- What is the best method to communicate information to parents in a way that is useful and understandable to them?
- What tools or resources should be available to those charged with measuring the effectiveness of parent involvement programs?

Conclusion: Getting from Here to There

Sustaining and expanding policies to support early learning leads to an array of long term social, educational and economic benefits. However, moving ahead on any of the five issues reviewed above will require leadership and collaboration. As policy decisions for creating quality early learning opportunities for young children are considered, the knowledge and commitment of a number of key stakeholders – from governors and legislators, to agency directors and chief state school officers, to advocates and researchers – must be assured. Finally, good policy and practice will require not only broad vision but careful crafting of implementation and operation. Creating model policies by addressing these five emerging issues will further the work that has been done so far, to establish early learning as a key component of state policy.

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[1] Mimi Howard, *Early Learning Legislation 2005: Overview of Trends and Issues* (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 2006), available from ECS, http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/68/33/6833.doc.
[2] Mimi Howard, *Current and Emerging State Policy Trends in Early Childhood Education: Review of the Governors' State of the State Addresses 2006* (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 2006), available from ECS: http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/68/21/6821.doc.
[3] Kimber Bogard and Ruby Takanishi, "PK-3: An Aligned and Coordinated Approach to Education for Children 3 to 8 Years Old." *Social Policy Report,* Vol. XIX, Number III (2005): 3-23.
[4] Marshall, Nancy L., Dennehy, Julie, Starr, Elizabeth, Wagner Robeson, Wendy. *Preparing the Early Education and Care Workforce: The Capacity of Massachusetts' Institutions of Higher Education.* Welleseley College, 2005. retrieved online at http://www.wcwonline.org/earlycare/index.html

This policy brief was written by Mimi Howard, early learning program director at the Education Commission of the States.

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