

## ISSUE BRIEF

# 12 IDEAS FOR EARLY EDUCATION IN THE 112TH CONGRESS

LISA GUERNSEY, EARLY EDUCATION INITIATIVE

FEBRUARY 2011

As the 112th Congress gets to work, its members face an important opportunity to make lasting changes to public education. With the pending reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, also currently known as No Child Left Behind) lawmakers could enact significant improvements to strengthen early learning, as they also could in legislation related to the appropriation of funding at federal agencies. In this brief, the New America Foundation's Early Education Initiative proposes 12 policy ideas to improve access, quality, and alignment for children before kindergarten and through the early grades of elementary school.

## 1. Think PreK-12, not K-12.

Education laws should reflect today's reality: public education starts before kindergarten. Publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs, while not accessible to all families, are serving a growing number of children around the country – both in schools and in nearby community centers and preschools. Yet these programs are rarely recognized as part of the public education system. In ESEA, for example, sections on Improving Teacher Quality State Grants (Title II), Troops to Teachers, and the Teacher Incentive Fund are not always clear about their applicability to state-funded pre-k teachers or to teachers in childcare centers that contract with local educational agencies. These provisions should make explicit that they are PreK-12, not K-12, programs. This would ensure that taxpayer dollars are leveraged to their full advantage within the complete spectrum of the education system.

## 2. In grant competitions, favor states with effective early learning strategies.

When faced with the possibility of winning additional federal dollars, many states have responded with decisive action to strengthen their chances, as shown by the U.S. Department of Education's Race to the Top (RTTT) program. Unfortunately, the original structure of RTTT did not reward states for advancing effective programs and policies related to early learning. In the same way that RTTT was able to push states to improve charter school regulations, the competition could be used to spur states to improve their early learning strategies. States should be motivated to meaningfully connect their public schools to already existing and effective programs that serve children before they arrive in kindergarten. One way to do this is to weight the scoring in grant competitions to favor states that enact policies that promote effective and aligned programs from pre-kindergarten through third grade. These policies should include the use of tools like school-readiness assessments (with added value given to those that account

---

for children’s social as well as academic development); the inclusion within longitudinal data systems of data on the public programs that individual children attended before reaching kindergarten; and structural reorganization at the state and local levels that eases collaborations between pre-kindergarten programs, including Head Start, and elementary schools. Furthermore, weighted scoring for early learning should not stop with RTTT. Other competitive programs like Investing in Innovation, Striving Readers, and the proposed Early Learning Challenge Fund, should be designed to reward states and local districts that implement effective early learning strategies up through the early grades of elementary school.

### **3. Use School Improvement Grants to expand full-day kindergarten and high-quality pre-k.**

Each year the U.S. Department of Education provides grants to assist school districts in turning around their low-performing schools. In the current guidelines for these School Improvement Grants, full-day kindergarten and pre-k are already mentioned as “permissible” activities under the “transformational” model of school turnaround, but neither is required. Given the research base in support of high-quality pre-k and full-day kindergarten, especially among disadvantaged populations, and given the critical role that both play in ensuring that children succeed in school, full-day kindergarten and high-quality pre-k qualify as evidence-based interventions for turning around failing schools. A school that provides no pre-k opportunities or that offers only half-day kindergarten is missing significant opportunities to provide young children with more learning time (such as high-quality story time and hands-on exploratory projects) and is consequently putting unhealthy pressure on students to catch up in first grade. To be eligible to receive School Improvement Grants for elementary schools, local educational agencies (LEAs) that choose to implement a “transformational” model should pledge to provide children in those schools with the same number of hours of kindergarten as are offered in the school’s other grades. The Department of Education should

also provide incentives to LEAs to expand opportunities for high-quality pre-k in partnership with community providers near that school.

### **4. Build stronger links between principals and early childhood programs.**

Elementary school principals should be considered as the linchpin to success in building high-quality early learning systems that extend through the early grades. They decide which teachers to hire in children’s primary years, including kindergarten through the third grade, as well as pre-k in many cases. Moreover, they are in a central position to forge connections between “feeder” early childhood programs (such as nearby childcare centers or preschools) and whatever programs and instruction are provided in the elementary school. Such connections are necessary ingredients for better alignment in curriculum and standards, increasing the chances that children, from their earliest years through the early grades, receive a seamless, high-quality education. But too often principals are disconnected from the field of early childhood and are afforded little time to absorb new research on child development and instructional strategies that apply to young learners. Title II of ESEA – the section of the law dedicated to developing stronger teachers and leaders – should be amended to provide new programs for augmenting principals’ knowledge of early childhood and encouraging them to form partnerships with feeder programs in their communities. Some states, such as New Jersey and Pennsylvania, recently launched promising professional development programs that make these connections. Other states should be encouraged to do the same.

---

For coverage of ESEA reauthorization and the federal appropriations process, see the Early Education Initiative’s website:

[EarlyEd.NewAmerica.net](http://EarlyEd.NewAmerica.net)

---

---

## **5. Encourage the use of valid and reliable observation tools to measure teacher effectiveness throughout the PreK-12 system.**

Early childhood educators are on the forefront of new approaches that rate teachers' effectiveness. In the past few years, Head Start programs and state-funded pre-kindergarten programs have been taking detailed accounts of how their teachers interact with students, minute by minute, during group and individual instructional time in the classroom. Using trained third-party observers, these observation-based tools enable professionals to score teacher quality from low to high in several domains. Studies have shown that high teacher scores correlate with students' performance on tests of language and mathematics skills. These observation tools, which are designed to be helpful to teachers as opposed to punitive, are not just for pre-k. They can and should be used with teachers from pre-k through twelfth grade as part of professional development programs that are structured to help teachers improve. These tools can provide valuable data to school districts on which teachers are most effective and where to target resources to lift the quality of instruction. Definitions of teacher quality in ESEA should be expanded to encourage districts and community providers of pre-k programs to use such instruments in improving their workforce.

## **6. Promote high-quality traditional and alternative teaching programs to recruit talented individuals in STEM to become pre-k and early elementary school teachers.**

A new push is underway to build a teacher workforce for the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). This effort should recognize and embrace the fact that STEM teaching extends to children's earliest years, including pre-k, kindergarten, and the early grades. Young children are unabashed in their curiosity about how the world works; they are at a prime age to become hooked on exploring the wonders of science and

math. But too often, their teachers are not equipped to harness that excitement in part because: 1) preparation programs for teachers of young children do not include enough focus on how to appropriately teach STEM subjects in pre-k, kindergarten, and the early grades and 2) the STEM teacher programs that do exist are usually high-school or middle-school focused. This is true of both traditional programs and those that offer alternative certification, which many mid-career professionals rely on to shift to the teaching profession. To overcome both deficits, the federal government should encourage states to revamp traditional programs and create high-quality alternative certification programs that help recent college graduates and mid-career professionals learn what they need to teach STEM subjects well in early education classrooms. And all programs for pre-k-through-third-grade teachers should include a stronger emphasis on how to engage young children in STEM subjects through hands-on projects.

## **7. Fund research on young children and digital technology.**

New e-book technology – like that of the iPad, the Kindle, and the Nook – is enabling children to download and browse through picture books that might not exist in their classroom or nearest library. Interactive games, mobile "apps," and social-networking sites are becoming increasingly aimed at preschool and elementary-school-aged children. Meanwhile, the growing urgency around STEM and literacy is leading producers to market a growing number of "educational" digital games and apps. Policymakers like to highlight technology as a tool for enhancing productivity in classrooms and between teachers, but its actual impact on children's learning – especially among young children – is still unknown. A very short list of research projects, such as those under the U.S. Department of Education's Ready to Learn Television program, show that particular programs can help children gain basic literacy skills. But large-scale research projects on newer devices, interactive games, or software programs are virtually non-existent, as is research on broader

---

measures of young children's cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development. Educators need guidance on how digital technology should be harnessed to help teachers do their jobs and help children explore their world. The U.S. Department of Education and other federal agencies should establish new streams of funding for high-quality, independent, and methodologically sound research on the use of digital technology with young children, birth through age eight.

## **8. In rewriting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) sanctions, give credit to elementary schools that show evidence of using student data to improve instruction in the early grades.**

Under current ESEA rules, if schools receiving Title I money are not showing “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) in meeting proficiency benchmarks on state tests two years in a row, they are labeled as “in need of improvement” and face sanctions. Because the AYP provision pertains only to test scores for third grade and above, it neglects to take into account the progress that schools may be making in the earlier grades, creating an incentive for schools to focus resources in the later-tested grades instead of improving instruction starting with the youngest children. And in elementary schools that are building a quality early learning system to enable children to acquire solid foundational skills by the end of third grade, the improved third-grade test scores that result from these measures may show up too late to rescue the school from sanctions. As policymakers consider ways to embed more flexibility into ESEA, they should consider using existing “safe harbor” provisions to exempt certain schools from sanctions on a temporary basis. These provisions should enable schools to get credit for making progress on two fronts: gathering data on the progress being made by students in the early grades (including progress in their social-emotional development) and using that data to help teachers fine-tune their instructional strategies and spot children who may need extra help. This doesn't mean that low-performing schools should be given a pass from improving student

outcomes in third grade and beyond – that work must continue to be stressed. The law should be crafted so that schools are able to avoid sanctions if, within a set time frame, they show 1) improvements in gathering and using data to improve instruction in the early grades and 2) increasingly positive trajectories for test scores in the later grades.

## **9. Target elementary absenteeism.**

Recent research has documented alarmingly high rates of chronic absenteeism – children missing at least 10 percent of school days in a year – in our nation's elementary schools. This is particularly true among low-income students and schools in impoverished areas. Evidence also shows that chronic absenteeism in the early grades dramatically reduces a child's likelihood of achieving at grade level. But while efforts to strengthen the reliability of attendance data collection have been underway for several years, the impact of absenteeism has not been addressed. Schools track truancy (unexcused absences) but rarely look at how many children are missing days in school because their parents called in to excuse their absence. The federal government could help by 1) setting a federal definition of and raising awareness of chronic absence and 2) ensuring that competitive grants to states, school districts, and municipalities include a focus on lowering rates of elementary absenteeism in high-poverty communities. These grants should support the development, implementation, and rigorous evaluation of systemic initiatives to reduce absenteeism, including the creation of data systems that keep track of which children are most often absent and help educators and social workers determine how best to respond.

## **10. Support the ability of effective charter schools to offer high-quality pre-k programs.**

A small number of charter schools offer high-quality pre-k programs either within, or in alignment with, charter elementary schools that are helping children succeed. Several KIPP schools in Texas, for example, show

---

promising signs that by starting at age three or four and providing high-quality instruction throughout those years and into the early grades, children can achieve at high levels. But in many places, charter schools are unable to open their doors to children at age three or four because funds are not available to start earlier than kindergarten. These barriers to funding are due in part to outdated K-12 policies embedded in state and federal laws. In some states, for example, state code defines education as starting at kindergarten or in “elementary school” and therefore prevents states from extending subgrants to pre-k charter schools. Congress can help by updating the definition of a charter school in section 5210 of ESEA to make clear that “elementary and secondary education” means PreK-12 instead of K-12 education. The charter school grant program in ESEA could also be designed to elicit assurances from state grantees that pre-k programs are, indeed, eligible recipients of federal charter-school subgrants. Making these changes could spur the development of more schools that provide a seamless continuum of learning experiences for their students from their earliest years through elementary school.

## **11. Recognize the connection between the prosperity of families with young children and the economic future of our country.**

Children’s growth and development in early childhood is intimately connected to their performance in school and their chances of being part of a productive workforce. New research is connecting these dots with greater strength each year. Child poverty may be costing the economy \$500 billion a year in lost productivity, according to economists at Georgetown University. And poverty among young children from birth through age six may be more destructive than at any time in their childhood, having a lasting impact on their ability to finish high school on time and, once adults, avoid government assistance such as food stamps. Young children in impoverished families not only have less access to high-quality childcare and preschools,

they are also more likely to be living with parents who are highly stressed and at risk of resorting to neglectful or unhealthy parenting practices that can stymie children’s social and cognitive development. This evidence on child poverty’s long-term impact on the U.S. economy must be front-and-center in debates on federal budget cuts. Public programs with evidence of effectiveness in assisting families with young children take up a tiny portion of the federal budget; drastic cuts to those services would make little perceptible dent in the U.S. government’s debt. Effective programs for young children in poverty should be shielded from cuts that disrupt service to those children.

## **12. Channel funding to *effective* programs.**

Federal dollars should be channeled to programs with evidence that they work in improving outcomes for families and young children as opposed to those with evidence that they are simply well-attended or popular. A program included in the recent health-care legislation – the Affordable Care Act Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program – serves as a model. Home visitation programs assist low-income mothers who have infants and toddlers by employing nurses or social workers to visit with those mothers regularly to provide medical, health, and child-development advice. The new federal program enables states to disburse funding to non-profit groups that run these programs, and the federal law was written to ensure that the dollars are directed to programs based on *models with evidence of success*. The law states that the evidence – such as data showing that children served by the program are healthy and hitting the expected milestones in language development – must come in the form of studies that are experimental, quasi-experimental, or run according to other sets of standards determined by the research community. Congress should consider replicating parts of this model to place an emphasis on effectiveness in other federally funded programs as well to ensure that taxpayer dollars are being put to good use and having a positive impact on young children over time.

---

Our work is made possible through generous grants from the Foundation for Child Development, the W. Clement and Jessie V. Stone Foundation, and the A.L. Mailman Family Foundation.



© 2011 New America Foundation

This report carries a Creative Commons license, which permits re-use of New America content when proper attribution is provided. This means you are free to copy, display and distribute New America’s work, or include our content in derivative works, under the following conditions:

**Attribution.** You must clearly attribute the work to the New America Foundation, and provide a link back to [www.Newamerica.net](http://www.Newamerica.net).

**Noncommercial.** You may not use this work for commercial purposes without explicit prior permission from New America.

**Share Alike.** If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under a license identical to this one.

For the full legal code of this Creative Commons license, please visit [www.creativecommons.org](http://www.creativecommons.org). If you have any questions about citing or reusing New America content, please contact us.

		 NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION  <a href="http://WWW.NEWAMERICA.NET">WWW.NEWAMERICA.NET</a>
<b>MAIN OFFICE</b> 1899 L Street, NW Suite 400 Washington, DC 20036 Phone 202 986 2700 Fax 202 986 3696	<b>CALIFORNIA OFFICE</b> 921 11 <sup>th</sup> Street Suite 901 Sacramento, CA 95814 Phone 916 448 5189	