

Early Learning in ESEA Reauthorization

Improved education outcomes start with early learning for children up to the age of kindergarten entry. Early learning narrows the achievement gap, increases school readiness, and builds a solid foundation for success in college, career, and life. With the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) slated for reauthorization, Congress has the opportunity to build on the current status of early learning in ESEA, which mentions early childhood education 85 times, and further recognize early childhood education as a key building block for achieving our nation’s college- and career-readiness goals.

Since ESEA’s reauthorization a decade ago, many states and school districts have made high- quality early learning an essential part of their long-term strategy for education reform. Their progress in working with early learning programs has outpaced current law. Given the proven cost-effectiveness of quality early learning for at-risk young children, more can and should be done to further integrate and coordinate early learning, from birth to age five, with K-12.

The First Five Years Fund urges changes to ESEA in six key areas.

1. Coordinate and Align Early Learning and K-12 Systems

ESEA reauthorization should build upon current law to support state and local efforts to coordinate and integrate early learning programs and K-12 systems. For example, Title I requires districts and schools to assist with transitions from early learning to K-12. The revised law should clarify that this requirement can include direct support to, coordination with, and creation of early learning programs. Furthermore, existing requirements to coordinate with Head Start should be expanded to include other publicly funded early learning programs such as child care and state pre-kindergarten.

2. Align Early Learning with College and Career Readiness

Learning begins long before children enter kindergarten, and defining what children should know and be able to do in order to be “school ready,” as well as what schools should be ready to do when children enter, helps early learning programs, families, and schools prepare and succeed. Just as the higher education and business communities should collaborate to develop meaningful college- and career-readiness standards, a collaborative process that involves relevant state agencies and builds on goals articulated in the Head Start Act should define school readiness. ESEA should permit states to use their federal assessment dollars for developmentally appropriate early learning assessments designed to guide instruction.

3. Promote Teacher and Leader Professional Development and Effectiveness

Just as in K-12, student success in early learning is driven by high-quality teaching. Recognizing the unique needs of young children, preparation and professional development for K-3 educators should incorporate early childhood development. In order to build the capacity and effectiveness of early learning teachers, federal law should help them gain relevant degrees and credentials in programs that incorporate coursework on child development, knowledge of and practice toward school readiness, and integrated professional development with K-3 teachers.

4. Develop Data Systems

Data collection and analysis is essential for enhancing program quality and accountability, as well as giving families and educators information. ESEA should at minimum support development of data systems for all children in government-sponsored early learning programs, and these data systems should link to those in K-12. States should have flexibility to determine whether the early learning data system is part of the state's education longitudinal data system, or if it is established as a separate yet connected system.

5. Support State and Local Districts

ESEA should at minimum maintain local decision makers' ability to use Title I for early learning. With existing funds, districts and states that use Title I for early learning should be given priority in competitive grant programs. If Congress appropriates additional Title I funds, a percentage of new dollars, over 2009 levels, should be required to fund early learning strategies or to provide matching supports to districts that use Title I funds for early learning.

6. Integrate State Systems of Early Learning

All of the above recommendations build upon current law and respond to existing efforts to better integrate and coordinate early learning and K-12. For example, the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge competitive grant program recognizes state innovation in early learning and spurs additional systems building and policy change. The design for RTT-ELC and other proposed legislation, like S. 470: Supporting State Systems of Early Learning, should work in concert with a reauthorized ESEA to better enable state leaders to draw together the disconnected strands of early learning into a system focused on encouraging consistent quality and higher standards, with an ultimate goal of ensuring that more at-risk children begin school ready to succeed.