

First Five Years Fund

January 15, 2015

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman, Senate Committee on
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

The Honorable John Kline
Chairman, House Committee on
Education and the Workforce

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

The Honorable Bobby Scott
Ranking Member, House Committee on
Education and the Workforce

Dear Committee Leaders,

The First Five Years Fund (FFYF) is committed to improving the lives of at-risk children by spurring greater investment in high quality early childhood programs that improve education, health, and economic outcomes for our nation. As you and your committees continue the important work of reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), we ask that you consider enhancing the law by supporting state and local efforts to elevate, expand, and better integrate quality early learning with K-12 education. Doing so will significantly contribute to the goal of graduating students who are college and career-ready.

As you are well aware, ESEA currently provides opportunities for state and local decision-makers to integrate early learning with the K-12 education system. In fact, there are 85 references to “early childhood” in the law – but it is showing its age and should be revised to reflect state innovation in using early childhood programs to foster success in elementary and secondary schools. When the law was enacted over 10 years ago, state and local attention to early learning was not as commonplace. Since then, recognition of the role that quality early learning programs can play in the ultimate success of students in the K-12 system has resulted in expanded use of ESEA and other funds to support school- and community-based early learning programs. We also believe there is a lot that early learning can offer to the K-12 system from parent engagement to taking a developmental approach to learning.

We must reexamine our current system if we are going to ensure that children graduate prepared for college or career. As we raise our K-12 standards, we should not lose the opportunity to acknowledge where students build the foundation for successful, lifelong learning. Inherent in this success is the need for quality which should be included and supported in the law. Our recommendations fall into three categories:

1. Supporting Quality Early Childhood Learning Programs
2. Improving Flexibility to Enhance Investments in Early Learning and
3. Establishing a Coordinated and Aligned Early Learning and K-12 System

Supporting Quality Early Childhood Learning Programs

Over the past decade, a growing number of states and communities have responded to the growing body of research on early childhood education by prioritizing the issue. States have made progress in building systems and infrastructure to support early learning programs, including through the assistance of federal Early Learning

Challenge Funds. More recently, Congress has twice appropriated funds to support preschool development and expansion, and 36 states have applied for these funds. It is in this spirit, that we recommend a dedicated funding stream to support state efforts to expand high quality early childhood education to more children from low- and moderate-income families. It should focus on building or enhancing existing state preschool programs with an emphasis on elevating quality.

Improving Flexibility to Enhance Investments in Early Learning

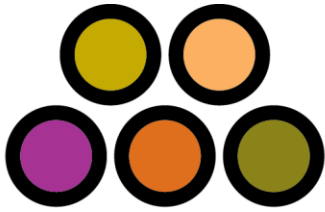
As there has been a recognition of the importance of improving seamless coordination of services between early learning and K-12 systems, providing flexibility in the use of funds to support early learning should be a key part of any reauthorization effort. In addition to express authority under Title I, potential improvements range from permitting Title IV funds to be used for early learning programs; amending the measure of poverty to include children birth through age 17; extending the charter school program to include our youngest learners; and including early learning as a competitive grant priority. Additional recommendations in this area are:

- Add “investments in early learning” to the list of explicitly authorized strategies for improving low-performing schools, which should be part of a systemic improvement strategy. LEAs may serve as a direct provider or make grants to high quality community partners. ESEA funds are currently used to support home visiting models, and should expressly be included as an element in this instance.
- Allow Title II funds to be used for professional development of teachers and principals that focuses on child development, knowledge, and practice. The interrelationship between early learning and K-3 should be emphasized and integrated.
- Make explicit in Title II that funds can be used for programs that address the preparation, recruitment, and retention of early learning teachers and leaders, as well as training.
- Any reference to early elementary teacher qualification requirements should include appropriate recognition in early childhood development, behavior, and learning.

Establishing a Coordinated and Aligned Early Learning and K-12 System

There are a number of areas where reauthorization should seize upon the opportunity to better align and integrate early learning by making coordination more explicit. Consistency across the Act is critical, as is acknowledging that students in any given school system may be younger than age 5. We would be happy to work with you to craft specific language to achieve the goal of greater coordination and alignment. Specific recommendations for reauthorization in this area include:

- Make explicit current Title I requirements to “assist in the transition from” early learning to K-12, including direct support to, coordination with, and creation of school- or community-based early learning programs.
- Expand existing coordination requirements in Sec. 1120B beyond Head Start to include other publicly-funded early learning programs, such as child care and state pre-kindergarten. Ask local educational agencies (LEAs) to report on these efforts. Similar coordination requirements should be included as part of State education agency (SEA) and LEA plans.
- Reform existing reporting requirements to capture information that is critical to the efficient and effective use of public funds to improve student outcomes, such as how funds are being spent on early learning; the number of children served by age; extent to which funds are being blended with other public or private funding; and relevant outcome measures selected by the state.
- Expressly allow states to include early learning standards as part of their state-defined academic standards, and ask that state standards in the K-12 system align with state early learning standards in a manner that is analogous to current alignment with higher education.



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- Do not arbitrarily focus on test results in 3rd grade and higher, but instead permit states to give equal weight to all grades, K-12, in their defined accountability systems. To make this possible, authorize states to base accountability determinations on a combination of factors beyond test scores, including quality of practice and other child outcomes. Prohibit the use of assessments for accountability purposes prior to third grade, and instead promote other valid and developmentally appropriate assessments.
- Allow states to use federal dollars to support developmentally appropriate early learning assessments that would be used exclusively as an instructional tool for educators, leaders, and parents. Assessments should be aligned to the early learning standards that coordinate with K-3 standards, including standards for learning across all domains of development.

The First Five Years Fund understands the many issues you must face as you make decisions about what the next version of ESEA will include. We ask that you give careful consideration to the decisions made by states and local school districts that acknowledge the importance of early learning, as well as to the body of evidence that supports these efforts. We hope you see early learning as an opportunity to evolve ESEA in a positive and appropriate direction. We look forward to working with you and your colleagues as you work through the reauthorization process.

Sincerely,

Kris Perry
Executive Director
First Five Years Fund