

GROW AMERICA STRONGER *with* **QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

February 6, 2015

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Senate Health, Education, Labor and
Pensions Committee
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Senate Health, Education, Labor, and
Pensions Committee
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Kline
Chairman
House Committee on Education
and the Workforce
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Robert Scott
Ranking Member
House Committee on Education
and the Workforce
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairmen Alexander and Kline and Ranking Members Murray and Scott:

On behalf of the Grow America Stronger campaign, we are writing to offer recommendations regarding the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The Grow America Stronger campaign is a coalition of early childhood advocates dedicated to making high-quality early childhood education a national priority and advancing greater federal investments.

High-quality home visiting, early intervention services, Early Head Start and Head Start, child care, early learning, public and community-based preschool programs, and elementary school programs—all are essential resources to ensure a continuum of care that improves education, health and economic outcomes for children from birth through grade three. To this end, the Grow America Stronger campaign is committed to ensuring that an ESEA reauthorization strategy includes a larger federal investment in high-quality early childhood education – in addition to existing funding for early education and K-12 education - to support state efforts to expand access to children from low- and moderate-income families that are not already receiving services or have been underserved.

Specifically, the Grow America Stronger recommends the following priorities be considered as part of the ESEA reauthorization process to ensure that the nation's most at-risk children are receiving high-quality early learning and development opportunities:

- **Establish a dedicated federal formula funding stream to improve access to high-quality early childhood education to low- and moderate-income families.** There should be a robust federal investment to support state, tribe, and outlying areas efforts to expand services to include infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children provide high-quality early learning opportunities to low- and moderate-income families at or below 200 percent of poverty. Additionally, this dedicated federal formula funding stream should augment the total investment in early childhood education in existing programs and be one component of a coordinated and integrated approach to making high-quality early learning services available for all children and families in the state. To accomplish this, the State Advisory Council for Early Learning and the State Department of Education or other early learning lead agency should work together to determine the best use of funds in order to supplement but not supplant current federal, state and local investments.

Recognizing that education starts at birth, the dedicated federal formula funding stream should expand access to:

- **Preschool Opportunities:** Federal investment in high-quality preschool opportunities should address the following:
 - **Develop a Federal-State Partnership:** The federal government and states should work together to design aggressive plans for rapidly increasing access to high-quality preschool programs. This should include a funding match that encourages sustained participation by offering a slow ramp up in state spending and avoiding sharp increases in required state match in a single year. States seeking to access federal funding through a dedicated formula funding stream should be required to describe how they will improve access to high-quality preschool for children in low- and moderate- income families.
 - **Maintain State Flexibility:** States are in various stages in implementation of preschool programs and should have discretion to decide whether funds are best used for expansion or quality improvement. States should have the flexibility to use funding to improve access to high-quality preschool for children in low- and moderate-income families, which may include expansion of a high-quality program or improvement of existing slots to meet higher quality standards.
 - **Set High-Quality Standards:** A large body of research shows that high-quality preschool programs lead to benefits for children and families. It is essential that preschool programs funded under this federal funding stream meet high-quality standards. Elements of quality should include: 1) high staff qualifications, including B.A. degrees for teachers with reasonable time and financial resources to attain this requirement; 2) ongoing professional development for teaching staff and leaders; 3) a full-day program equal to the state's educational day and school year; 4) developmentally appropriate, evidence-based curricula and learning environments that are linguistically and culturally appropriate; 5) low child-to-staff ratios and small class sizes; 6) employee compensation and benefits that are comparable to K-12 teaching staff; 7) system to support continuous quality improvement of programs; 8)

on-site comprehensive services for children and families coordinated by family services staff; and 9) systemic, integrated, and comprehensive approaches to family engagement.

- Promote a Mixed-Delivery System: Preschool expansion should include a wide range of early childhood education providers that meet high quality standards, such as schools, Head Start, child care, and private preschool programs in order to help parents choose the provider that best meets the needs of their family.
- Infants and Toddlers Services: Congress should signal the importance of access to high-quality care and early learning opportunities for infants and toddlers by requiring states to set aside a percentage of funds of a dedicated formula funding stream to improve access for infants and toddlers to early childhood education programs through a mixed-delivery system that meet high standards of quality.
- **Maintain existing federal investments in early childhood education under ESEA.** Currently, explicit authority is provided throughout ESEA to support allowable use of federal funding on early childhood activities. ESEA reauthorization should continue to provide authority to the local level to use federal ESEA funding as allowed under current law to provide services to children from birth through the age of school entry.
- **Enhance coordination and alignment of early learning and kindergarten through grade three programs.** To improve alignment and integration of services for children, there should be explicit requirements throughout ESEA to assist in the transition from early learning to kindergarten through grade three programs, including direct support, coordination with, and creation of school- or community-based early learning programs. This should include requirements in state, local educational agency, and school-wide and targeted assistance school plans to ensure coordination and alignment of services through community-based partnerships.
- **Encourage States to adopt developmentally appropriate, early learning assessments.** States shall develop comprehensive assessment systems that consist of coordinated and comprehensive systems of program quality and child development, using multiple assessments that are valid and reliable for the specific purpose for which they will be used. The use of child assessments shall conform to the recommendations and cautions of the National Research Council reports on the use of child assessments.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide recommendations to improve the ESEA. While these recommendations should be read with the understanding that some organizations within the Grow America Stronger Campaign support additional or varied policy positions, the coalition looks forward to working with you during the reauthorization process to improve access to high- quality early learning and development opportunities for children.

Sincerely,

First Five Years Fund
National Women’s Law Center
Ounce of Prevention
Alliance for Early Success
Parents as Teachers
The Early Care and Education Consortium (ECEC)
NAEYC
Center for American Progress Action Fund
ZERO TO THREE
Alliance for Strong Families and Communities
AFT
United Way Worldwide
Service Employees International Union (SEIU)
Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)
Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPIY-USA)
AFSCME
First 5 LA
LAUP
Fair Share
New Mexico Early Childhood Development Partnership
Rhode Island KIDS COUNT
Advocates for Children of New Jersey
Child Care Aware of America
Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC)
First Focus Campaign for Children
Generations United - Seniors4Kids
Hadassah, The Women’s Zionist Organization of America, Inc.
IDEA Infant Toddler Coordinators Association (ITCA)
National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS-SDE)
NAFCC
National Black Child Development Institute
National Education Association
National Organization for Women
National PTA
Nemours Children's Health System
RESULTS
Save the Children Action Network
Teaching Strategies
Easter Seals
National Center for Families Learning