



April 19, 2023

The Honorable Bernard Sanders
Chair, Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

The Honorable William M. Cassidy, M.D.
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

Submitted via email to ESRA2023@help.senate.gov

Re: Comments on the *Education Sciences Reform Act* Reauthorization Request for Information

To Whom it May Concern,

I am writing on behalf of First Five Years Fund (FFYF) to share recommendations for the pending reauthorization of the Education Sciences Reform Act (ESRA). FFYF is committed to ensuring all children from birth through age five have equitable access to affordable, comprehensive, high-quality early care and education (ECE) to support their healthy development and help them achieve their full potential in school and life. ESRA's reauthorization is an opportunity to support state and local efforts to expand access to high-quality ECE through improved research and data, which play vital roles in shaping the policies and practices that support children's learning and development. As such, we are focusing our comments on question 13 in your recent Request for Information on ESRA Reauthorization.

STRENGTHEN RESEARCH ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

FFYF commends the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) for its research initiatives on ECE, particularly its role in understanding effective policies and practices to improve school readiness skills for preschool children. FFYF recommends that Congress expand research on ECE, specifically recurring research and data collection on how families navigate the current child care system and challenges providers and early childhood educators face in providing high-quality ECE in a variety of settings. Expanded research to better identify and understand the issues and gaps on both the supply and demand sides of the child care market is essential to creating a more equitable and effective system. Timely and comprehensive research on ECE

preferences, as well as barriers to access, quality, and affordability, particularly for historically disenfranchised groups, is often unavailable or inaccessible.

Expanding federal research is necessary to understand the complex and changing issues facing children, families, and ECE providers and to improve access to high-quality early learning opportunities. Given that the federal government plays a foundational role in providing ECE experiences through a mixed-delivery system, it is well-positioned to utilize existing systems and connections with states and programs to expand research efforts. Federal support could foster timely data collection, ensure research is used to directly inform policy, implementation, and continuous improvement efforts, and encourage effective alignment across often fragmented systems.

To best inform policy and effective implementation, research must be timely, accessible, responsive to current needs, and used in collaboration with pertinent offices. IES research has multiple audiences and should be conducted to meet the needs of state and local administrators, practitioners, researchers, families, and advocates, among others. FFYF encourages IES to improve transparency and engage varied stakeholders in the process of determining new research priorities. To strengthen IES's research and minimize overlap, IES should coordinate and collaborate with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, which produces key research on programs impacting young children.

IMPROVE EARLY LEARNING DATA ACCESS AND USE WITHIN STATES

ESRA reauthorization is an opportunity to address the national need for robust early learning data access and use. Accurate and comprehensive data are integral to making informed decisions about ECE and can improve program accountability and increase student achievement. ECE is a fragmented space, and timely and relevant data are needed to help determine what services are available, where gaps persist, and how to best allocate resources. Data on program quality and child outcomes are also important to determine whether public funding is providing effective, equitable services that meet families' needs.¹ Improving data

¹ The Early Childhood Data Collaborative (ECDC), "[2018 State of State Early Childhood Data Systems](#)"

systems is particularly salient as early childhood systems navigate recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unlike elementary and secondary education, ECE services are delivered across multiple agencies and programs, making data integration across programs challenging. State and local agencies delivering early childhood services typically have system(s) in place to collect data in order to analyze their programs and gain a better understanding of the participating families. Unfortunately, these systems are often not linked, creating a barrier to access essential data between the agencies overseeing critical elements of the ECE system and the families they serve. Additionally, static data systems increase the regulatory burden on community programs tasked with reporting the same or similar information to different agencies. Only 22 states link data between all or some early childhood programs (with varying degrees of linkages), 18 of which have implemented an early childhood integrated data system, according to 2018 data from The Early Childhood Data Collaborative. Updating the Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) program to expressly support and encourage linking early childhood data systems within states would empower policymakers, practitioners, and families by providing timely data they can use to best meet children's needs.

In recent years, states have leveraged federal Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) funds to develop the capacity to meet their early childhood data needs. Planning grants support states in developing needs assessments and strategic plans, and renewal grants help states strengthen data infrastructure, update their state's needs assessment, and improve collaboration among services. However, despite applications demonstrating the importance of early learning systems and the necessity for support, as well as significant state progress using PDG B-5 funds, limited funding has impeded many states from fully developing comprehensive systems.

Equally important to encouraging this cross-agency approach within early childhood is promoting alignment of ECE, elementary and secondary, post-secondary, higher education, and workforce systems. ESRA reauthorization is an opportunity to align with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which includes important provisions obligating the coordination of school districts with Head Start and other ECE providers. While every state has a SLDS, 21 do not

incorporate early learning data.² Connection between ECE and elementary education is useful as an instructional tool in both settings: for example, elementary school teachers benefit from information on early childhood assessments, and ECE programs benefit from feedback on children's progress in the elementary grades. The SLDS program needs significant and sustained funding to ensure systems have these capabilities.

Data sharing challenges are not new. When Congress updated the Head Start Act in 2007, it required states to establish State Advisory Councils to address this and other coordination challenges. The Head Start Act required these councils to "develop recommendations regarding the establishment of a unified data collection system for public early childhood education and development programs and services throughout the State." This obligation encouraged important state planning and coordination, but funding challenges and other obstacles still prevented states from developing unified data systems.

ESRA reauthorization should support state efforts to ensure program data can be used effectively by families, practitioners, advocates, and policymakers for decision-making, research, and continuous improvement. Sufficient investment in these systems is needed to ensure that early education data are both accessible and usable. An updated SLDS must also include measures to ensure data security and confidentiality.

Improving the quality and availability of research and data through ESRA reauthorization is an important step to ensuring that policymakers and other stakeholders have the information they need to support high-quality ECE systems. Thank you for considering our recommendations. We appreciate your leadership and would be pleased to meet with your staff to further discuss ESRA reauthorization as a component of high-quality early learning.

Sincerely,



Sarah Rittling
Executive Director
First Five Years Fund

² Education Resource Commission of the States, ["50-State Comparison: Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems"](#)

EDUCATION SCIENCES REFORM ACT – ADDITIONAL FFYF SUGGESTIONS

National Research and Development Centers

FFYF encourages the Committee to continue ESRA's direction that IES's national research and development centers must continue to include a center focused on "early childhood development and education."

Definition of "Early Childhood Educator"

FFYF encourages the Committee to expand the law's definition of "Early Childhood Educator" to include a specific reference to teachers in preschool and Head Start.

National Center for Education Statistics

FFYF encourages the Committee to update ESRA's directive to NCES to collect/acquire/compile data on "State and local early childhood school readiness activities" and "access to, and opportunity for, early childhood education" to specifically include the phrase "for children from birth through age 5". FFYF also suggests adding language to ensure that this data is disaggregated by age and educational setting. Under this approach, existing law would be amended to read as follows (changes underlined and in italics):

"The National Center for Education Statistics is tasked, among other duties, with collecting, acquiring, compiling (where appropriate, on a State-by-State basis), and disseminating full and complete statistics (disaggregated by the population characteristics described in paragraph (3)) on the condition and progress of education, at the preschool, elementary, secondary, postsecondary, and adult levels in the United States, including data on—

(B) State and local early childhood school readiness activities for children from birth through age 5.

(L) access to, and opportunity for, early childhood education for children from birth through age 5."

"(3) collecting, analyzing, cross-tabulating, and reporting, to the extent feasible, information by age, gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, educational setting, limited English proficiency, mobility, disability, urban, rural, suburban districts, and other population characteristics, when such disaggregated information will facilitate educational and policy decision making"