



# Ensuring America's Future

Policy Statements and Recommendations from  
National Education Organizations



October 2011

Dear Friends,

Education leaders know that, high-quality early education is a wise investment that will pay off in the future. Teachers, principals, superintendents, state and local school boards and chief state school officers all agree that in addition to addressing the urgent needs of children in the K-12 system we must begin providing students with the skills that they need to be successful in school prior to Kindergarten.

Through the work of the Pre-K Coalition, our nation's leading education organizations have joined together to voice their strong support for pre-kindergarten education and to recommend policies that will enable the federal government to better partner with states and local school districts. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) offers us an opportunity to demonstrate a collective commitment to building a strong, aligned P-12 system of education. This report represents the consensus of many conversations among coalition members over the last 10 months. I am pleased that the coalition has put forward a clear vision with bold recommendations in a number of key policy areas: access, workforce quality, program quality, alignment, and program coordination.

The work of this coalition has truly been a collaborative effort involving multiple stakeholders. While each organization has its own priorities for improving the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), teachers, principals, superintendents, state and local school board members and chief state school officers all agree it is time to reframe the law to better support policies and practices that ensure young children are ready and able to succeed in school.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read 'Anne L. Bryant', is positioned above the typed name.

**Anne L. Bryant**

Executive Director,  
National School Boards Association

## INTRODUCTION

Since 2001 when Congress last reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), there has been an explosion of new evidence on the benefits of high quality early childhood programs, and a host of new early learning leadership efforts across states and in communities. Participation in an educational program prior to Kindergarten is no longer viewed as a privilege, but rather a vital component to educational success. Teachers, principals, superintendents, local and state school boards and chief state school officers agree that a high quality early education is essential to ensure that children develop the cognitive, social and emotional skills they need to be successful in school.

Today, two-thirds of all children are enrolled in a center-based early care and education program the year before entering Kindergarten, and forty percent of 4-year olds participate in publicly funded programs. Public schools have become central to the world of early education—whether they serve as the administrative agent for a pre-k program, provide space for a program, or partner with local preschool providers. Data show that two-thirds of all children in publicly funded pre-k are in public school settings.

But while many states and communities have made tremendous progress in expanding programs, we still have a long way to go. Our current system of early education is disjointed and federal investment is weak. Pre-k programs vary widely in quality, content, and amount of funding. In addition, too many children still do not have access to high quality care in their communities.

The reauthorization of the ESEA offers a unique opportunity to update our nation's primary federal education law to take full advantage of the power of high quality pre-k. This means reframing ESEA to expand policies and practices to include younger children and early education interventions. This report outlines the collective vision of teachers, principals, superintendents, local and state school boards and chief state school officers to lay a firm foundation for pre-k in ESEA and recommends how the federal government can better support states and communities around issues of access, workforce quality, program quality, alignment, and program coordination.

Providing children with a high quality early education takes the collective commitment of multiple parties including school districts, communities, parents, state education agencies and the federal government. Together, teachers, principals, superintendents, local and state school boards and chief state school officers are calling on the federal government to do its part.



## EQUITABLE ACCESS

We believe that all three- and four-year-old children in the United States should have access to high quality, effective public pre-kindergarten. Pre-kindergarten should be universally offered to all families who wish to enroll their children, and delivered through multiple providers including public schools, child care centers, community-based organizations, and family child care providers that can demonstrate successful outcomes. It is essential that all local, state and federal policymakers and stakeholders come together to design an early childhood financing system that ensures equity, supports quality and effectiveness, fosters collaboration, and does not take funding away from any other existing education programs.

### Recommendations

The federal government can support this principle in the following ways:

- Dedicate resources to help states develop systems of coordinated services and to expand access to high-quality pre-k programs, without compromising existing resources and services.
- Provide state and local flexibility to spend funding across early childhood programs in order to maximize early education services and create a more integrated delivery system.
- Maintain and strengthen investment in existing early childhood programs to support a robust system of services for children and families.
- Remove any legislative or regulatory policy barriers to coordination and collaboration between states and local school districts and early education programs.
- Establish an ongoing local-state-federal partnership that will engage multiple stakeholders in efforts to expand and enhance the quality and effectiveness of voluntary pre-k programs.

“If we want to provide equitable opportunities for quality education, begin early; if we want to eliminate the achievement gap, begin early; if we want to eliminate failing schools, begin early; if we want to prepare all students for success in postsecondary education and employment, begin early.”

— Gene Wilhoit, Executive Director,  
Council of Chief State School Officers

“All children need and deserve a good start. Attending a high quality pre-kindergarten program is an important part of starting early and starting right.”

— Dennis Van Roekel, President,  
National Education Association

## PROGRAM QUALITY

Research evidence overwhelmingly shows that children’s participation in a high-quality pre-kindergarten program makes a critical difference in their development. High-quality early learning environments are associated with enhanced child outcomes in the areas of language, vocabulary, early math, and social skills. Research identifies multiple structural and process-related components of high-quality programs, including:<sup>i</sup>

- Supportive interactions between teachers and children
- Comprehensive early learning standards and aligned curriculum that supports all areas of children’s development— physical, social, emotional and cognitive
- Ongoing reflection and evaluation of teaching practices
- Teachers with appropriate preparation and higher education credentials
- Small class sizes and low teacher-child ratios, and
- Parent engagement

To ensure high quality programs, states should have clearly articulated early learning standards that are developmentally appropriate and aligned with K-12 academic standards. Learning standards should be accompanied by standards for program quality, which must extend beyond health and safety standards and include guidelines regarding teacher qualifications, curricular resources, family engagement, and the provision of social services for families. States should monitor the quality of local programs to make sure they are meeting quality standards. Program standards and monitoring of pre-kindergarten programs must also be connected to and coordinated with other early childhood programs in the state to ensure that all children have a fair chance to participate in a high quality program.

### Recommendations

The federal government can support this principle in the following ways:

- Provide incentives for states to adopt comprehensive early learning standards that will guide program quality.
- Support the development and enhancement of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) to build, align, and strengthen the core components of an early learning system.
- Support states and districts in designing policies and infrastructure that will enable systemic quality improvement (e.g. upgrading accreditation and/or licensing procedures, development of data networks, and coordination among existing early childhood programs).
- Disseminate best practice research on new and innovative early education models that have demonstrated a strong impact on student outcomes, and provide technical assistance to help states and districts replicate these models.
- Sponsor research and evaluation studies to validate standards and tools for assessing and improving program quality in state pre-kindergarten and other early learning programs.

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<sup>i</sup> Quality components are based on factors identified by the National Research Council and the National Institute of Early Education Research, and do not constitute an exhaustive list of quality indicators.

## QUALITY WORKFORCE

High-quality pre-kindergarten begins with a high-quality workforce. It is imperative that federal, state and local education agencies work together to improve professional development, education, credentials, and compensation for all early childhood professionals regardless of the setting in which they are employed. Our goal should be for all pre-k teachers to possess a bachelor's degree along with specialized training in early childhood education, and to receive professional-level compensation. Recognizing that this is not yet the case, we must raise standards and provide career pathways and incentives that improve the qualifications, skills, effectiveness, and compensation of our current workforce.

To be as effective as possible, teachers, support professionals, and administrators must receive ongoing, sustained, and early childhood specific professional development. This includes opportunities for pre-service and in-service professional learning, coaching and mentoring, and planning with colleagues that are aligned with state P-3 standards and programs. Professional development should be evidence-based and include: knowledge of child development, knowledge and implementation of curricula to address state early learning standards, implementation of appropriate developmental screening and assessment tools, use of data for instructional decision making, and effective family engagement strategies.

### Recommendations

The federal government can support this principle in the following ways:

- Provide incentives and technical assistance to states to develop professional development systems and professional compensation structures for educators in all early education settings.
- Create incentives for states to upgrade their teacher certification and licensure requirements to ensure that all pre-k teachers possess, at a minimum, a bachelor's degree and specialized training in early childhood education.
- Assist states in designing and implementing comprehensive P-3 professional development systems that include professional standards, career pathways, and articulation across higher education programs and institutions.
- Provide dedicated resources and incentives for teachers and administrators to continue their education and specialized training over time.
- Disseminate best practices concerning program content, successful student outcomes, and effective collaborative practices to key policymakers and stakeholders at the state and local level.
- Provide funding and guidance to help states and local districts provide consistent data on their early childhood workforce in order to develop more uniform and reliable data.

“Whether one views it through an educational or an economic prism, it makes sense to get pre-k and early education right from the start.”

—**Randi Weingarten, President, American Federation of Teachers**

## PROGRAM COORDINATION

The current lack of coordination among early care and education programs, their funding, policies, and targeted communities, creates barriers to access and quality. This patchwork approach often results in duplicate services, a convoluted number of programs and policies that are largely divorced not only from each other but also from the K-12 system, and contradictory policies that ultimately are not in the best interest of taxpayers or children and their families. Parents can find it difficult to make sense of what is available, what is a good program, and how these programs should operate. We support moving from a conglomeration of categorical programs to a more coherent system that focuses on better program delivery, and embraces common program goals and shared expectations for young children, birth through age 5 and beyond.

All stakeholders should work to build systemic linkages between early childhood providers and schools that transcend disparate programs, departments, and funding streams. Collaborative processes across agencies and programs (such as the alignment of data, professional development, and comprehensive services) are critical in order to leverage experience and resources, reduce inefficiencies, develop a common language, and establish collective accountability for improving teacher quality and child learning and development.

We support initiatives by federal, state, and local district leaders to improve consistency across programs and move toward a common framework for early childhood that addresses standards, assessments, data, professional development, and accountability. If we are committed to eliminating the achievement gap, these policies and infrastructure elements need to apply to all settings where young children spend time outside of parental supervision—including, but not limited to, childcare centers and family childcare, early childhood special education, Early Head Start, Head Start, and state pre-K programs. School readiness must be seen as a comprehensive concept that includes early learning, social development, nutrition, health and family support.

### **Recommendations**

The federal government can support this principle in the following ways:

- Reduce the burden of parallel sets of regulations and reporting requirements across federal funding streams, by using common definitions of terms and coordinating the timing of data collection from state and local agencies.
- Allow coordination and blending of federal and state early childhood education and care funding to help strengthen early learning systems.
- Work with states and school districts to develop a common reporting system for early learning programs that ensures confidentiality and allows for the easy transfer, sharing, and access of a child's information throughout all stages of early childhood education and care.
- Support inclusive decision-making at the federal, state and local levels between K-12, early education providers and a broad range of community stakeholders when planning and implementing programs (such as the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge).
- Align QRIS quality standards and reviews with state pre-kindergarten and Head Start standards and program monitoring.

## P-3 ALIGNMENT

Comprehensive preschool-through-third-grade (P-3) initiatives are critical to ensuring that children develop a solid foundation in literacy, math, social-emotional skills, as well as strong engagement in learning. Alignment of standards, curriculum, instruction, assessments, family engagement and professional development efforts across pre-k-grade 3 classrooms will create a seamless and effective pathway of learning opportunities and supports for all children. Alignment efforts should be informed by research on child development and early education, and structured to draw on best practices and insights from early childhood and elementary school practitioners. This approach will help ensure that students are ready for schools, as much as schools are ready for students.

P-3 alignment begins with comprehensive Early Learning Standards that are aligned with state K-3 content standards to promote children's healthy development, social & emotional skills, motivation and engagement in learning as well as progress in learning literacy, language, mathematics and science. These standards should be logically connected and build upon one another so as to guide the work of pre-k, kindergarten and primary grade educators in developing and selecting effective curricula, teaching strategies and assessment systems.

P-3 alignment also means that "vertical teams" of teachers will work together in studying assessment data to plan continuous improvement efforts, build partnerships with families and engage in joint professional development.

P-3 alignment depends on strong state and district support, in addition to leadership initiative from early childhood program managers, elementary school principals and other administrators, and organizations that represent educators to create a climate of high expectations and mutual respect for the interactions of early childhood and early elementary school teachers. Elementary principals must establish a culture of shared responsibility among all partners in the learning community to encourage the connection to families, ensure that appropriate early learning settings are present in the school building, and support instruction that aligns to a continuum of learning from pre-K to grade 3. The payoff for this hard work will be success for children, reduced costs of remediation and retention, and enhanced prospects for all students to graduate from high school with college- and career-ready skills.

### **Recommendations**

The federal government can support this principle in the following ways:

- Support state and local P-3 alignment efforts as a policy and funding priority across all HHS and ED-funding programs for young children, ages 3-8.
- Allow schools to adopt a comprehensive P-3 restructuring strategy as one component of a potential model for school improvement.
- Support the development of P-3 credentialing for educators that recognizes the important learning needs of children from P-3 and create a more seamless educational experience in these years.

- Encourage collaborative efforts and interaction among teachers, schools, local school districts, elementary school principals, and other school and district administrators, Head Start programs, and early childhood education organizations, to support children and families through transitions from pre-k to elementary school and best practices to support a strong continuum of learning in the early years.
- Support, as an allowable use of funds, joint planning and professional development between early childhood providers and P-3 teachers and elementary school principals, which will help to build a shared understanding of early childhood development and intentional sequence of learning to enable effective transitions between grades and among programs.
- Provide supplementary resources and wherewithal to develop P-3 alignment pilot projects and/or combined efforts to align P-3 systems.
- Provide best practices information and technical assistance to states, local districts and schools to develop effective evaluative tools for ages 3-8, data systems to track the progress of children across P-3 years, and support for P-3 teachers and elementary school principals to understand and use assessment data to make sound and appropriate instructional decisions.

“There’s no disagreement among practitioners or researchers about the need to improve our nation’s lowest performing schools, but we must begin during the formative years. Early learning and elementary school partnerships must be at the heart of our improvement equations. Elementary principals understand the need to support high-quality early learning experiences, especially through the third grade, to lay a foundation for successful lifelong learning.”

—**Gail Connelly, Executive Director,**  
**National Association of Elementary School Principals**

“School administrators recognize the importance of having students ready for schools and schools ready for students. Early childhood education gives students a solid foundation on which they can build a strong academic experience.”

—**Dan Domenech, Executive Director,**  
**American Association of School Administrators**

## CONCLUSION

Over the past decade, states and school districts have made tremendous progress in expanding access to pre-kindergarten, and have been working to coordinate the efforts of pre-k, child care, Head Start, and other early childhood programs to build a high-quality continuum of early learning. However, our nation still is a long way from being able to provide what we know works.

As Congress looks at reforming our nation’s federal education law, policymakers must recognize the important role of early education in improving student outcomes. The evidence is clear on the benefits of this policy for children, public education and tax-payers. If we are to truly reform our education system, we must begin by providing students with the skills they need to be successful prior to kindergarten.

Together, teachers, principals, superintendents, local and state school boards and chief state school officers call on Congress to reauthorize ESEA with a strong early education component. The policy recommendations outlined in this report will make a significant impact on improving opportunity and outcomes for all children, and help to ensure a brighter future for our nation.

“State boards of education need to use their policy levers and bully pulpits to bring early childhood education and K-12 systems into alignment and to integrate pre-K-3 education into the broader discussion of student achievement.”

— Brenda Lilienthal Welburn, Executive Director  
National Association of State Boards of Education

## About the Coalition

The Pre-K Coalition is a collaboration among the nation's most influential education groups—the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), National Education Association (NEA), and the National School Boards Association (NSBA)-- to develop common principles for pre-k policy within federal legislation and build national awareness about the importance of pre-k. The coalition meets regularly to develop consensus policy statements and recommendations regarding a number of key early education issues. Inquiries about the coalition should be directed to:

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For additional information, please see: <http://prekcoalition.org>.



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**Pre-K Coalition**

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