

# Expanding Access to Early Childhood Programs

Advocates can play a key role in encouraging P-12 leaders to expand access to high-quality early childhood education (ECE) programs for children from birth to third grade, with a focus on policies that help low-income families and families of color choose the programs that best meet their children's needs.

## What do we know?

- **Early childhood programs [have long-term benefits](#) for children, yet fail to reach those who can most benefit.** Numerous studies have found that children who participate in high-quality early childhood programs from birth to five that focus on physical, social-emotional, and cognitive health and development have [better long-term outcomes](#) than children who do not have these experiences. Yet, data also show that [Latino children](#) are less likely to access ECE programs at all; that [Black children](#) and those from low-income families are less likely to access [high-quality early childhood education programs](#); and that the child care arrangements they do have are often of [lower quality](#) than their peers.
- **Children need to be supported [through planned transitions](#) as they move from early childhood programs into kindergarten.** [Thoughtful processes](#) that engage parents, teachers, and young students in the process of moving between programs can improve children's success in school.
- **There is no one-size-fits-all approach to investments in early childhood programs.** Different families have different needs and desires for programs at various stages of their children's lives. Similarly, different communities may have different early childhood programming needs and desires, especially families of color, bilingual, and low-income families. State leaders in education and other agencies need support to invest in a variety of programs and design policies that enhance access to high-quality early childhood programs.
- **School and district leaders should be part of a community process to increase access to high-quality early childhood programs.** No single entity in the community can meet the needs of all families. Working together, schools, community organizations, and families can assess the strengths and needs of the community and leverage funds and policy change to ensure that all families have access to the programs that best support them. Ensuring that such an assessment includes the range of early childhood programs (including home visiting programs, programs for children from non-English speaking households, developmental assessments and interventions for young children, playgroups for relatives caring for children, or other supports for working families) is critical.

## Advocacy guide roadmap

This guide offers advocates critical information and ideas about how to encourage school, district, and state leaders to expand access to high-quality early childhood programs. It suggests:

- **Key questions to ask** about how **state, district, and school leaders** will incorporate early childhood strategies into school improvement efforts
- Ways that advocates can **use ESSA** to press state, district, and school leaders to improve access to high-quality early childhood educational opportunities for low-income families and families of color.
- **Examples** of states, districts, and schools that are rising to the challenge, prioritizing equitable access to high-quality early childhood opportunities.

## ▶ QUESTIONS TO ASK DISTRICT AND SCHOOL LEADERS *about early childhood opportunities*

Advocates should ask these questions of both district and school leaders.

### 1. What is the process to invite families with young children (in pre-K or kindergarten) to the school community?

#### Look for:

- Schools that welcome young children and their families to their new classrooms and teachers before the first day of school, with multiple opportunities to become familiar with school routines, home visits from teachers, and orientations for families to meet school staff offered in multiple languages
- Training for teachers to help them effectively engage families with young children
- Developmental screenings and assessments for young children before entering school
- Materials and resources about early childhood and kindergarten programs available throughout the community (in libraries, laundromats, grocery stores, and religious sites, for example) in a variety of languages

#### Watch out for:

- No process for welcoming families with young children to school
- Form letters for families that focus on school paperwork needs rather than family supports

### 2. What efforts have been made to understand the experiences of children and their families before they enter school and ensure communication and continuity between early childhood programs and elementary schools?

#### Look for:

- Knowledge of community-based child care programs among elementary teachers and school leaders
- Surveys of family experiences prior to school entry that inform school practices
- School-level partnerships with Head Start and other early childhood programs to continue family support services and other comprehensive supports
- Information on children's development shared between educators in early childhood programs and elementary teachers and school leaders
- Common expectations and standards for what children should know and be able to do as they move through programs from birth to third grade

#### Watch out for:

- Lack of knowledge of community programs
- No mechanism to gather information from families about children's experiences

### 3. How are district or school leaders improving the quality of early childhood programs?

#### Look for:

- Training for teachers serving children from birth to third grade that focuses on the needs and development of young children
- Partnerships and formal agreements to share resources and data, and develop common expectations for educators, with community-based programs
- Using funding in ESSA (Title I, II, III and IV) for programs that serve infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children and their families, including bilingual programs
- Using the school improvement planning process to improve access to and the quality of early childhood programs in high-need communities
- Participating in community-wide, data-informed planning to increase access to high-quality early childhood settings, especially in low-income communities and communities of color
- Analyzing all funding sources to leverage all available resources to support young children
- Providing staff or other support to ensure that children and families with young children have the resources they need

#### Watch out for:

- No investments in pre-kindergarten or other early childhood programs
- No connections to Head Start or other community-based child care programs

### 4. How are district and school leaders ensuring that low-income families and families of color have access to high-quality early childhood?

#### Look for:

- A needs-assessment process that includes information on which early childhood programs are serving which communities
- Strategic planning process for elementary schools identified for improvement that addresses access to high-quality early childhood programs
- The development and expansion of bilingual programs for all children, home visiting, and full-day and year programs to meet the needs of working families
- Grants and other funding for early childhood programs that prioritize services to low-income families, families of color, and the communities in which they live

#### Watch out for:

- School improvement interventions that do not include early childhood
- Materials and resources that do not reflect the languages, cultures, and demographics of communities

## Districts and schools that are rising to the challenge

The [District of Columbia Public Schools](#) provides high-quality early childhood programs for all three- and four-year old children in the city, using a combination of general school funds and Head Start program investments to ensure that programs meet quality standards, have highly trained teachers, and are meeting the full range of children's developmental needs. The district is now working with community partners to make infant and toddler programs available in school buildings in order to better serve low-income families.

[Boston Public Schools](#) district has engaged in a multi-year process with public and private funding to ensure high quality programming for children from pre-kindergarten through kindergarten and into first and second grade. The district focuses on professional development for teachers, invests in curriculum and standards that support improved outcomes for young children, and partners with community-based early childhood programs to increase access.

## ► QUESTIONS TO ASK STATE LEADERS ABOUT *access to quality early childhood opportunities*

### 1. How will the state help district and school leaders understand early childhood opportunities and challenges, including inequities in access for low-income families and families of color?

#### Look for:

*Your state leaders to:*

- Provide data and other information to districts about early childhood programs in their district, and patterns of access to quality programs for low-income families and families of color as compared to other families
- Support development and use of appropriate assessments in kindergarten through third grade to help track children's progress
- Provide information on available funding sources for early childhood programs

#### Watch out for:

- High-stakes, developmentally inappropriate tests that punish children or programs
- No breakdown of access by income or race

### 2. How will the state help district and school leaders improve access to high-quality early childhood opportunities?

#### Look for:

*Your state leaders to:*

- Increase funding for childcare and pre-K programs, prioritizing support for programs serving low-income families and families of color
- Provide guidance on best practices and standards for implementing high-quality programs and meeting the needs of a diverse range of families and children
- Share model memoranda of agreements to promote partnerships between community-based ECE providers and public schools and districts
- Share model budgets to encourage schools and districts to target federal funding to support early childhood programs and teachers and provide other comprehensive supports in communities of color and low-income communities
- Support flexible and innovative approaches to combining funds from various sources to serve more children in partnerships with community based ECE providers serving low-income children and children of color
- Create consistent policies and practices across state agencies that focus on wellbeing of young children and their families

#### Watch out for:

- Inconsistent approaches to early childhood programs from different state agencies
- Data-driven decision-making that does not focus on children from low-income families and children of color
- Priorities for funding that do not emphasize access to high-quality early childhood programs for children from low-income families and children of color

### 3. How will the state demonstrate that early childhood is a priority for school improvement?

#### Look for:

*Your state leaders to:*

- Monitor and evaluate whether — and, if so, how — schools and districts are using available funds for early childhood programs and supports
- Create a template for a needs-assessment that includes the data needed to understand early childhood resources in a community and support school and district leaders in making connections and gathering information
- Provide research summaries of effective practices to support children from birth to third grade
- Award planning grants, school improvement funds, and Title IV resources to districts that demonstrate a need and interest in providing early childhood services
- Include early childhood interventions and supports in guidance for school improvement strategies
- Provide technical assistance to districts to use targeted resources (including those who are homeless, those from non-English households, and those with disabilities) to provide appropriate early childhood interventions and services
- Include early learning access and quality in the resource allocation review

#### Watch out for:

- Lack of focus on young children in planning, grant awards, monitoring, and technical assistance to districts with schools identified for support and improvement

### States rising to the challenge

**Louisiana** has created a [report card system](#) for all programs serving children from birth to age four. The reporting system is designed to show the quality of programs and to give parents and districts critical information that allows them to engage in efforts to improve quality and ensure all children and families have access to a high-quality program that best meets their needs.

**Connecticut** will require districts to conduct a “landscape analysis” of the early childhood programs in the community as part of the needs-assessment required under ESSA for schools identified as needing comprehensive support and improvement. Districts will also be required to engage in transition activities for children entering kindergarten and will be encouraged to explore blending, braiding, and layering funds to expand access to high-quality early childhood programs. The state is developing guidance in each area and will provide technical assistance to districts as leaders move forward with their plan.

### How can advocates use the Every Student Succeeds Act to prompt district and school leaders to increase access to early childhood programs?

- **Improvement Plans:** Under ESSA, school improvement plans for Comprehensive and Additional Targeted Support schools must identify and address **resource inequities**. Advocates— who district and school leaders must consult under ESSA’s stakeholder engagement requirements — can push local leaders to include access to high-quality early learning as an indicator of resource equity.
- **Use of Federal Funds:** ESSA allows and encourages states and districts to use federal dollars (e.g., Titles I, II, and III) to increase access to early childhood programs and supports both in schools and in the community. Districts must engage with stakeholders when developing their applications for these funds.

- **LEARN and Preschool Development Grants:** Advocates can also encourage states and districts to apply for discretionary grants. LEARN grants, which focus on literacy for young children, are available to states and communities to improve the quality of literacy instruction and resources. States can also apply for Preschool Development Grants, which can be used to develop, update, or implement a plan to increase collaboration or coordination among existing early childhood programs and participation of children from low-income families in high-quality early childhood programs.

ESSA provides other opportunities for advocates to push state and district leaders to focus on early childhood education. Advocates can also ask how the state and districts will address early learning in their accountability and public report systems, assessments, and standards.

## Additional resources

**[Non-Regulatory Guidance Early Learning in the Every Student Succeeds Act: Expanding Opportunities to Support our Youngest Learners](#)** (U.S. Department of Education) This federal guidance provides an overview of the early childhood requirements in ESSA for states and districts and gives examples of how states and districts can use the flexibility in the Act to support increased access to early childhood programs and help improve the quality of existing programs.

**[Opportunities in ESSA for Improving Early Education](#)** (National Association of State Boards of Education) Is a resource for State Boards of Education on maximizing ESSA to support early childhood programs at the state and district level.

**[Improving Early Learning Through the Every Student Succeeds Act](#)** (National Conference of State Legislators) This is a brief primer for state leaders to understand how ESSA can support early childhood programs.

**[Every Student Succeeds Act: Guiding LEA Needs Assessments and Plan Development to Consider Early Learning](#)** (Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center/WestEd) provides an overview of how states can use the needs-assessment processes throughout ESSA to promote early childhood education at the district level.

**[Uses and Misuses of Kindergarten Readiness Assessment Results](#)** (The Ounce of Prevention Fund) discusses how to use kindergarten readiness assessments to track progress for young children for continuous improvement.