



# America Forward on Early Learning

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## **Introduction**

America Forward is a coalition of more than 100 organizations nationwide, focused on advancing public policies that foster innovation, identify more efficient and effective solutions, reward results, and catalyze cross-sector partnerships in education, early childhood, workforce development, youth development, and poverty alleviation. We are educators, advocates, case managers, and organizers working in more than 15,000 communities across the country and touching more than 9 million lives every year.

Our organizations work to support students, young people, families, educators, workers, leaders, and communities by providing critical tools, supports, funding, and resources to increase accessibility and improve outcomes. America Forward brings together nonprofit leaders and social entrepreneurs with policymakers to leverage community-based solutions to address systemic inequities that exist in both our education and workforce systems. Over the past year, the coronavirus pandemic, a renewed national reckoning on racial injustice, and much else has only deepened these disparities and highlighted the vital need to reimagine and restructure these systems with an intentional focus on equity, stability, and expanding opportunity so that every person can thrive.

## **Early Learning**

A key element of building a more equitable, accessible education system is an intentional focus on high-quality early learning opportunities that support the range of skills necessary for a child's early healthy development, from birth to 5 years old, and provide every child with a foundation for success in K-12 education and beyond. By centering early learning systems on the needs of every child; embracing holistic and diverse approaches to learning that foster key pre-academic skills; establishing positive early learning environments; and focusing on evidence-based programs proven to build critical cognitive and social-emotional skills, we have the potential to create the conditions whereby all early learners can thrive.

Strong partnerships play a key role in creating those conditions. Parents and caregivers are experts on their children and are uniquely positioned to engage in and support their healthy growth. At the same time, working parents and caregivers must be able to rely on quality, comprehensive child care services and a diverse, strong, and skilled early education workforce that supports early learners while allowing working families economic security. The government, too, has a key role to play in advancing meaningful policy and investments in the early education workforce - including support for rigorous professional development and competitive wages for early educators; innovative, high-quality programming; and

universal access to high-quality early childhood programming in under-resourced communities. Our collective goal is clear, ambitious, and critical: every child in America is supported through a whole-learner lens, to enter K-12 with the academic skills, emotional supports, strong adult relationships, and stability they need to succeed in school and in life.

## **POLICY PROPOSALS**

### **Innovation: Promote innovation in early childhood education**

The impact of high-quality early learning experiences is documented but scaling best practices and expanding equitable access remains a challenge. Continued innovation and improvement are desperately needed, as is further research and data. The federal government is uniquely positioned to promote and accelerate innovation across the diverse settings in which early education and child care take place, and is able to provide funding for research and evaluation, as well as for states to pilot new evidence-based, innovative approaches. The federal government should promote and accelerate innovation by:

- **Setting clear, measurable goals and outcomes** for all federally funded early child care and education programs, including but not limited to clearly defining whole-learner school-readiness metrics and parent engagement.
- Prioritizing the **implementation and sustainability of evidence-based whole-learner approaches** across existing early education funding streams.
- **Expanding technical assistance, research, and dissemination of best practices** through funding increases for the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), Comprehensive Centers, and Regional Education Labs (RELs), targeted at effective implementation of evidence-based whole-learner approaches.
- **Creating an Early Childhood Accelerator Fund** that provides grants to states, in partnership with specific communities that have a high percentage of families living in persistent poverty.
- **Investing in and leveraging partnerships** between early childhood researchers and high-reach operators, both within and outside the traditional early learning system, to take the latest science to scale and improve effectiveness and efficiency of early learning systems.
- **Supporting state and local coordination and merging of funding, programs, and deployment of evidence-based practices**, across the early childhood continuum and promoting coordination and partnership with the K-12 system.

- **Creating Pay for Success programs** or other innovative financing structures to support feasibility study work and evaluations, help structure Pay for Success projects and contracts, and contribute to success payments.
- **Leveraging educational media and other technological solutions** to support student learning, ensure digital equity, and spur family engagement.
- **Establishing tax incentives** in the form of tax credits - to stimulate and increase private sector investments in high-quality and high-impact early learning programs and initiatives, particularly for under-resourced communities - and by simplifying access to existing tax incentives.
- **Increasing the amount of Head Start program funds for research, demonstration and evaluation** to one percent of total appropriations, in order to increase demonstration authority and promote the development of a strong evidence base, which local grantees can use to improve their quality and outcomes.

**Evidence: Promote continued research and development and the use of outcomes-based and results-driven programs**

Although we have seen rapid advances in our understanding of early childhood development and high-impact interventions, the need for additional research in critical areas remains. Whether it is investigating how to scale proven interventions or honing in on which elements of early interventions are most effective at improving holistic outcomes for specific sub-groups of children, we must continue to build an evidence base that can inform and guide policy-making. The federal government can and should play a critical role in funding research and evaluation, including by:

- **Increasing investment in research and evaluation** approaches that identify best practices – particularly in the areas of early screening and issues related to pre-academic and other early skills.
- Permitting and elevating locally-driven efforts to redirect existing federal investments in training and technical assistance in early childhood to **support the adoption and growth of high-quality partnerships** to help the provider implement evidence-based and whole-learner approaches.
- **Highlighting best practices through further guidance** or considering resources analogous to the National Institutes of Health toolkit that would support the scale of best practices in early learning that elevate whole-learner, playful approaches to high-quality care, and build the critical capacity it takes to coordinate services and deliver better outcomes. These best practices would maintain a focus on **diverse supports that are culturally responsive throughout the system of early childhood education and that meet children’s individual needs.**

- **Increasing funding for the Institute for Education Sciences' (IES) evaluation of innovative early childhood education practices and programs**, including current research on new and more comprehensive measurements of whole-learner approaches, such as cognitive and social-emotional skills.
- **Providing funding support for robust evaluation approaches** that allow state and local governments to efficiently assess early childhood education practices and programs.
- Supporting efforts to **strengthen and simplify data systems**, including growing capacity to manage and implement new data systems that allow data sharing between and among early learning settings, K-12 schools, post-secondary education institutions, and external partners (in a way that protects student privacy) in order to allow for high-quality evaluation and continuous improvement of programs, thereby helping to ensure that limited resources are invested efficiently.

**Partnerships: Encourage and incentivize partnerships between states, communities, early childhood education providers, and effective external partners**

While the availability of high-quality early childhood education varies widely across states and communities, many states illustrate that our current mixed-delivery approach to early childhood education and child care requires aligned and streamlined federal funding, state and local support, and creative cross-sector partnerships. The federal government can build on efforts to date by:

- Supporting research, pilots, and demonstrations that **build an evidence base for greater, less-complicated funding streams** for early learning providers, to enable them to focus more on program quality and less on compliance-driven activities that have no evidence of contributing to better outcomes.
- **Incentivizing collaboration with high-quality partners and intermediary organizations** to help educators think critically about how to design educational spaces and curricula, and use existing resources most effectively to advance whole-learner approaches.
- **Enabling, highlighting, and strengthening opportunities for partnerships** among states, communities, early childhood education providers, community-based organizations, and effective external partners - such as the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, which layer equitable funding - to provide comprehensive services and high-quality early learning environments for families with infants and toddlers living in under-resourced communities. Such partnerships should focus on meaningfully and effectively engaging parents/guardians and families.
- **Supporting early learning providers in identifying, prioritizing, and selecting external partners** that can offer critical expertise, capacity, and evidence-based results.

- **Emphasizing partnerships** in the Preschool Development Grants.
- Providing additional **clarifying guidance for the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act (CCDBG) program**, highlighting examples of effective partnerships that build capacity, increase quality, and increase whole-learner supports.
- **Leveraging the insight of providers and partners through state and local partnerships** that help build and improve States' Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS), including improving input and outcome measures.

**Results: Focus early learning resources on performance and results**

Too often, national programs for early learning focus on input measures and compliance, rather than outcomes and success. Federal law and policy should focus on both performance and outcomes, rather than mere compliance by:

- **Setting clear, measurable goals and outcomes for all federally funded early care and education programs**; including but not limited to clearly-defined metrics for whole-learner school readiness.
- Giving providers **flexibility to administer programs with fewer input-driven requirements**, as long as they meet specific outcome measures, and providing additional funding to those programs that have strong positive outcomes.
- **Supporting pilot programs that encourage the adoption of innovative financing models** to support the advancement of evidence-based approaches and proven interventions that drive results.
- **Encouraging QRIS systems nationwide to use tiered reimbursement models** to better align incentives and support the adoption of evidence-based approaches provided by high-quality technical assistance partners or early childhood support organizations.
- **Allow QRIS systems to consider non-traditional and innovative approaches** such as Friends, Family and Neighbor (FFN) and dual-language programs.
- Driving continuous improvement, including by **requiring appropriate data collection, ongoing monitoring, and evaluation**, as well as providing flexibility for high performing, rigorous programs to continue innovating.
- **Encouraging the adoption of evidence-based programs** to improve program quality and outcomes.

- **Increasing investments in models that expand early learning screening and early intervention services**, as well as ongoing reform of the Head Start program to award a portion of grants each year to new partnerships, focused on measurable, school readiness outcomes.
- Leveraging existing programs such as Preschool Development Grants, Child Care Development Block Grants, and the charter school program to **provide incentives to states and communities to create high-quality charter preschools** that are designed to improve school readiness outcomes.
- **Reforming federal training and technical assistance (T&TA) funding**, such as in Head Start, to be awarded competitively, based on the performance of T&TA providers and, in doing so, improving the quality of the T&TA system by allowing for new innovations in Head Start.
- Supporting efforts to **strengthen and simplify data systems**, including efforts to grow capacity to manage and implement new data systems that allow data sharing between and among early learning settings, K-12 schools, postsecondary education institutions, and external partners in order to allow for high-quality evaluation and continuous improvement of programs while maintaining student privacy protections.
- **Leveraging administrative data to track longitudinal outcomes and build evidence** by continuing to track the impact of early childhood programs, such as measuring third-grade reading and math scores and other long-term measures such as reductions in child welfare and justice involvement, the attainment of postsecondary credentials and employment, and parental employment.

### **Workforce: Invest in building a strong local early educator workforce**

A growing body of evidence links well-trained, supported, and diverse early childhood personnel with the achievement of positive developmental outcomes for children. The science of early learning clearly indicates that the work of lead educators for young children of all ages requires the same high level of sophisticated knowledge and competencies as K-12 teachers, yet their salaries lag far behind. Teachers with four-year degrees employed in Head Start and many public pre-K programs earn between 60% and 70% of the average kindergarten teacher salary. In addition, early education BIPOC teachers, bilingual teachers, male-identifying teachers, and those with college degrees are in particularly short supply. Furthermore, as families experience increased economic demands and the need for high-quality early learning mounts, greater efforts are needed to rapidly recruit and retain high performing early educators with a multitude of skills, knowledge of evidence-based approaches to learning, and ability to speak multiple languages, as well as efforts to strengthen the diversity, recruitment, preparation, retention, and support of those working with young children and their families (including home visitors, preschool staff, and community health workers). Federal policies and initiatives can support this comprehensive strategy by:

- **Increasing professional development and growth opportunities** to improve the recruitment, retention, and ongoing support of the early educator workforce. Efforts to increase retention of high-quality early educators should also be partnered with initiatives to recognize high-quality educators and elevate the profession. Efforts to improve professional development and growth of early childhood educators should include holistic, engaging, and playful approaches to skill development, both for the adults being trained and the young children who those being trained will ultimately teach.
- Promoting and highlighting strategies that states have been using to **encourage and reward continuing education, training, and retention of early childhood educators**, such as state-sponsored wage supplements or tax credits.
- **Promoting Grow Your Own Program early childhood education teacher programs**, leveraging Title II, Part A under the Every Student Succeeds Act, to bolster efforts to meaningfully diversify the teacher corps and more effectively meet student needs.
- Urging states to **prioritize increasing early educator compensation** to foster parity between early educators and similarly-credentialed elementary teachers in public K-12 systems, in concert with increased professionalism and credentialing requirements.
- **Leveraging creative approaches to early educator preparation and credentialing**, including utilizing Federal Work Study funding and national service opportunities to allow college students and recent graduates to complete practicum hours and serve in early education classrooms, providing added capacity to implement high-impact approaches.
- **Strengthening the Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) grant program** to explicitly prioritize early childhood educator training by supporting eligible partnerships that choose to focus exclusively on innovative development for early educators. This includes initiatives that increase compensation for early childhood educators who attain associate or baccalaureate degrees in early childhood education. These programs can play a critical role in the professionalization of the field and quality of training available.
- **Improving preparation programs to include coursework and practical experience relating to students with disabilities and students with learning differences**, identifying the early signs of learning challenges, and effectively serving these students.
- **Ensuring that early educators and workers continue their education and training**, with access to supports and resources in multiple languages and settings (such as evening or online classes) in order to help maintain and increase diversity within the early education workforce and to reduce the drastic compensation disparities across roles. Such education and training should be

provided through a whole-learner approach, to support educators in their own learning and as they deliver holistic learning experiences to students.

- **Supporting programs that could provide two years of free education** to individuals with bachelor's degrees who agree to work in Head Start or a federally subsidized child development center for two years, with a bonus for teachers who are bilingual.
- **Developing a Head Start AmeriCorps program** to enable Head Start parents to serve in their children's centers as AmeriCorps members eligible for Segal AmeriCorps education awards, thereby allowing them to earn a college degree or other credential.
- **Incentivize a public-private partnership to fund an Early Childhood Legacy Corps** to offer financial incentives for older adults to serve in early childhood programs - expanding the talent pool, supporting early childhood programs, and creating a pathway to the professional and paraprofessional early childhood workforce.
- Preserving and expanding current loan forgiveness programs that **offer targeted incentives to early educators to work in under-resourced communities** where such educators are in short supply. Due to the significantly low salaries within the early education field, loan forgiveness programs should also be expanded to all early educators, regardless of the community in which they serve.

#### **Equity: Recognize a commitment to equity**

While some challenges in K-12 education are mirrored in the early learning field, the nature of a mixed-delivery system can further perpetuate inequities in quality and access. Advancing equity in the early learning field requires an explicit focus on removing barriers currently faced by young children in under-resourced communities to comprehensive supports and high-quality, inclusive, and developmentally appropriate content. Disparities in access disproportionately affect under-resourced students, students who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), Dual Language Learners, students with disabilities, students with learning differences, and children of immigrant parents. Additionally, as children of immigrants comprise the fastest growing segment of children between the age of 0-5, we must address the particular barriers that immigrant parents may face while both attempting to access early learning and child care services for their children and engaging in their children's early educational experiences. The federal government should take action by:

- Ensuring that **all eligible children**, regardless of their or their family's socio-economic or immigration status, **have access to high-quality early learning programs**.
- Incentivize support, through a tiered funding model, to **non-traditional and innovative providers**, such as Friends, Family and Neighbor (FFN), and expand access to learning opportunities of such providers.

- **Encouraging the growth of Dual Language programming, cultural responsiveness, and intentional recruitment of bilingual early educators.** We believe that early educator recruitment should focus on diversity and cultural responsiveness. Additionally, early educators should receive training to mitigate negative trends emerging in the early learning field, such as disproportionate suspension and expulsion of preschool BIPOC boys.
- Support a **federal ban to corporal punishment** in early childhood centers that receive federal funding, and incentivize policies that move away from exclusionary disciplinary practices and instead **promote restorative justice, counseling, mental health services, and/or other evidence-based approaches.** Evidence shows that the disproportionate use of exclusionary punishments in preschool harms the development of Black and other BIPOC children, leading to an increase in potentially traumatic events (PTEs) during childhood.
- Ensuring that **early education policy supports the critical role providers play in identifying and supporting students with disabilities and students with learning differences.** This includes supporting efforts to bring early screening for speech, language, hearing, vision, and learning difficulties to scale so that early learning and child care programs and professionals have the tools and information they need to identify children who may be exhibiting, for example, the early signs of learning challenges and attention issues.
- Strengthening training programs to highlight that even in early learning settings, Dual Language Learners may be erroneously recommended for Special Education services and **provide educators, including child care workers outside of a school setting, with practical tools to differentiate the acquisition of English from development delays that warrant special education or early intervention.**
- **Funding a national recruitment for early childhood teachers campaign on colleges,** targeting men and campuses with high percentages of Black and Latino/a/x students.

### **Family Engagement: Support programs that engage families in meaningful ways**

Parents, guardians, and families play a critical role in the development and trajectory of young children. In addition, they offer crucial lived expertise and valuable guidance for many of the issues we aim to address. The recently updated Head Start regulations, as well as the Every Student Succeeds Act, acknowledge the importance of both taking a two-generation approach and investing in parental and family involvement activities. With this understanding, a growing number of nonprofit and community-based organizations have been committed to delivering programming that builds a critical evidence base and demonstrates the importance of investing in parents from all communities and backgrounds, including immigrant and refugee parents and families, Dual Language families, and families of children with disabilities and children with learning differences. The federal government should further accelerate this work, including by:

- **Releasing guidance highlighting ways to leverage existing vehicles for funding**, like Head Start and Title I, to promote a multi-generational approach to engagement and place an emphasis on community partnerships to effectively knit together programs that engage parents and caregivers.
- **Integrating trauma-informed policies into existing early learning programs** to support the whole-learner, address such things as young learners’ mental health, and mitigate toxic stress. Policies should consider the need for community health resources delivered in partnership with early learning providers. Additionally, competitive early learning grants should consider and prioritize programs that leverage whole-learner approaches and evidence-based supports.
- **Ensuring that parental engagement activities are accessible to all parents**, including immigrant parents, parents with disabilities, parents with learning differences (including those who struggle with reading), and families whose lack of English proficiency and systems knowledge are barriers to engagement in their children’s early learning opportunities.
- Ensuring that any reauthorization of major early learning legislation **includes provisions that encourage both state-level and program-level staff to systematically seek parental and caregiver input** as new laws are developed and implemented.
- Highlighting and encouraging best practices in **addressing barriers to access and meeting the needs of families in child care deserts or rural areas with lower program density**, including local solutions that provide nontraditional programming hours and transportation supports.
- **Incentivizing holistic development in home visiting** by incorporating holistic child development and whole-learner approaches - specifically play-based approaches - into prenatal and home visiting programs. Modeling these approaches and providing hands-on experiences for families can provide valuable insights into the link between play and learning; increase their awareness of the dynamic potential they hold as key partners in their child’s development; and provide helpful tools to foster active engagement with young children.

## **Conclusion**

The past year in America has been defined by unprecedented challenges, enormous loss, and our continued struggle to confront deeply entrenched, systemic injustice and inequity. Nonetheless, we see enormous opportunity; opportunity to work collaboratively towards policies that expand opportunity, that embrace innovation, that leverage science and evidence, and that meaningfully advance equity. In the face of seemingly intractable challenges, we feel determined; determined to continue amplifying the voices of our Coalition members, determined to uplift effective, community-based solutions, and determined to build more equitable, accessible, high-quality systems that support students, educators,

workers, nonprofit leaders, and families in all of our communities. We look forward to working alongside our Coalition members, partners, and policymakers to make this vision a reality.

### **About America Forward**

America Forward is the Washington, D.C.-based nonpartisan policy initiative of New Profit, a pioneering national venture philanthropy organization that invests in a portfolio of breakthrough social entrepreneurs and systems-change initiatives, catalyzes and builds their impact, and transforms how government and philanthropy pursue social change to ensure that all people can thrive.

America Forward unites social innovators with policymakers to advance a public policy agenda that advances equity, fosters innovation, rewards results, catalyzes cross-sector partnerships, and transforms local impact into national change. The America Forward Coalition comprises a network of over 100 social innovation organizations that champion innovative, effective, and efficient solutions to our country's most pressing social problems. Since 2007, our Coalition organizations have successfully advocated for lasting policy change in education, workforce development, and Pay for Success policy; leveraged \$1.7 billion for social innovation; and driven millions of federal resources toward programs that are achieving measurable results for those who need them most