



## America Forward on Early Learning

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**America Forward** is the nonpartisan policy initiative of New Profit, a national nonprofit venture philanthropy fund that seeks to break down barriers between all people and opportunity in America. To date, New Profit has invested over \$150 million in scaling innovative organizations' impact. America Forward unites social entrepreneurs with policymakers and advances a public policy agenda that fosters innovation, rewards results, catalyzes cross-sector partnerships, and translates local impact into national change.

**The America Forward Coalition** is a network of more than 70 social innovation organizations that champion innovative, effective, and efficient solutions to our country's most pressing social problems. Our Coalition members are achieving measurable outcomes in more than 14,500 communities nationwide, touching the lives of 8 million Americans each year, and driving progress in early learning, education, workforce development, poverty alleviation, public health, Pay for Success, social innovation, and national service. Since 2007, America Forward's community of social entrepreneurs has played a leading role in driving the national dialogue on social innovation and advocating for lasting policy change. Together, our Coalition organizations have leveraged \$1.5 billion for social innovation and have driven millions of Federal resources, along with resources leveraged from donors and philanthropy, toward programs that are achieving measurable results for those who need them most.

### Who We Are

The America Forward Coalition includes diverse organizations that provide diverse supports to thousands of young children and families across the country. We are educators, advocates, case managers, and organizers. Some of our organizations provide coaching and development opportunities for early educators, while others run center-based or family-based high-quality education programs. Some of us work with families to help them navigate access to existing government programs and subsidies, leveraging a multigenerational approach responsive to community needs. Many of us provide critical student and family supports and improve access to outside providers, while others provide expanded learning opportunities for students. We work in early childhood education, elementary and secondary schools, afterschool and summer programs. Our organizations, while they may vary in approach, all reflect one central purpose: to ensure that every student, whatever his or her background, receives a first-class education that opens doors to economic prosperity and a successful life. We know that it is critical to start early and ensure that young children and families receive high-quality supports and experience student-centered learning environments at the youngest ages.

## What We Believe

We know firsthand the importance of a strong start that supports a child's healthy development, creativity, joy of learning, and pre-academic skills. Moreover, we know that access to comprehensive, high-quality early learning and affordable childcare can offer working families critical support, enabling them to achieve economic security. In short, we believe that early learning done well can change the lives of children, families and communities.

We believe in a vision of an early learning system, comprehensive and diverse in settings and approaches, and centered on the needs of every child from birth to school age. We are driven by the vision of a system that embraces a holistic and multi-generational approach to early learning and views parents and caregivers as partners, positioned to support their child's healthy growth and development.

We understand that a truly effective early learning system must be made up of diverse and high-quality early learning programs that are responsive to the needs of each child and every community, and provide every child with the developmental foundation for success in K-12 education and beyond.

We believe that this system must include a focus on evidence-based early learning programs that help to build cognitive and social-emotional skills aligned with school success and that lead to school readiness, defined by appropriate, comprehensive outcome measurements.

We believe government has a role to play and our commitment to early learning should be supported by meaningful Federal, State and public/private investments with a particular focus on supporting evidence-based programs in all of the places they exist - including center-based and home care provider settings. We believe Federal policy and robust investments should promote and accelerate innovation and evidence to help ensure that all students have access to high-quality programming and care.

We believe in an early learning system supported and strengthened by innovative, high-quality community and cross-sector partnerships that bring vibrant student centered programming into early learning settings and address disparities in resources.

We believe in building an early education workforce in which educators are afforded rewarding career paths with rigorous professional development and living wages that compensate their critical work and elevate the profession. And we believe it is critical that the workforce reflects the communities served and is well equipped with the practical experience, skills, tools and resources necessary to recognize children's strengths, needs and learning challenges.

**We believe that our collective goal is clear, ambitious and critical: every child in America enters K-12 with the academic skills, emotional supports, strong adult relationships and stability they need to succeed in school and in life.**

Our work together is to address the issues of quality and access in the current early learning system that we need to tackle to make our goal a reality.

We believe that high-quality early learning is one of the most essential investments we can make to create opportunity for families in this nation. At the same time, we acknowledge that early education is not a panacea. We believe in working towards a vision of comprehensive cross-sector supports and policies that create the conditions for all children to lead full and healthy lives. Without a doubt, this includes high-quality healthcare, income supports, and tax credits. This also includes parental supports that help parents engage in their children's early education and that empower low-income parents to pursue additional education and training to break the cycle of poverty.

We believe that early learning alone is not a great equalizer—but expanding access to high-quality early learning opportunities, in all the settings where children learn and grow, is a critical place to start.

## **Policy Proposals**

### **INNOVATION | Promote innovation in early childhood education**

The impact of high-quality early learning experiences is documented, but scaling best practices remains a challenge. Continued innovation and improvement is 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 childcare take place. The federal government is positioned to provide funding for research and evaluation, as well as funding for states to pilot new evidence-based, innovative approaches. The Federal government should promote and accelerate innovation by:

- Proposing aspirational goals and child outcomes by which quality can be measured.
- Creating a competitive grant fund, the *Innovate Early Fund*, that applies a tiered-evidence structure to funding or incentivizing efforts to create, develop, implement, replicate, or scale-up evidence-based innovations to improve early learning outcomes, and to rigorously evaluate such innovations.
- Investing in and leveraging partnerships among early childhood researchers, high-reach operators and social entrepreneurs, both within and outside the traditional early learning system, to take the latest science to scale through rapid cycle innovation and improve effectiveness and efficiency of early learning systems.

- Supporting State and local coordination and braiding 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 studies and evaluations, to help structure Pay for Success projects and contracts, and to contribute to success payments.
- Leveraging educational media and other technological solutions to increase 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 simplifying access to existing tax incentives.
- Advancing budget priorities that increase demonstration authority and promote development of a strong evidence base. A modest shift in funding for Head Start research, demonstration, and evaluation from 0.25 percent of total appropriations to 1 percent could drive significant innovation, particularly if it includes a focus on developing knowledge that local grantees can use to improve their quality and outcomes. With partnership from the philanthropic sector, this research funding could be stretched farther.

#### **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, critical research areas remain. Whether it is investigating how to scale proven interventions or honing in on which elements of early interventions are most effective at improving 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 that identify best practices – particularly in the areas of early screening and identification of 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 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. Maintain a focus on diverse supports that are culturally responsive and meet children’s individual needs. These resources can help build the critical capacity it takes to coordinate services and deliver better outcomes.

- Encouraging the Institute for Education Sciences to increase funding for evaluating innovative early childhood education practices and programs, including research on new and more comprehensive measurements of cognitive and social-emotional skills.
- Providing for robust evaluation funding support that allows State and local governments to efficiently assess early childhood education practices and programs.
- 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, 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, helping to ensure that limited resources are invested efficiently.
- Investing in necessary human capital and capacity required to strategically support and coordinate services.

**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 Federal funding, State and local support, as well as 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 child outcomes.
- Enabling, highlighting and strengthening opportunities for partnerships among States, communities, early childhood education providers, and effective external partners, such as the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships which layer funding to provide comprehensive services in high-quality early learning environments for low-income working families with infants and toddlers.
- Supporting early learning providers in identifying, prioritizing, and selecting external partners that can offer critical expertise, capacity, and improved results.
- Emphasizing partnerships as Federal agencies release a request for proposals for the newly authorized Preschool Development Grants.
- Releasing additional clarifying guidance on the implementation of the latest Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) reauthorization, highlighting examples of effective partnerships that build capacity, increase quality, and increase whole child supports.
- Encouraging 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 defining whole child school readiness metrics.
- Supporting policy and practices that focus on outcomes and give flexibility to administer programs with less or no input-driven requirements.
- Supporting pilot programs that encourage adoption of innovative financing models to support the advancement of evidence-based models and proven interventions that drive results.
- Encouraging QRIS systems nationwide to use tiered reimbursement to better align incentives and support the adoption of evidence-based models provided by high quality technical assistance partners or early childhood support organizations.
- 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 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 and be held responsible for results.
- 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.

## **WORKFORCE | Invest in building a strong local early educator workforce**

There is a pressing need to build a strong educator talent pipeline in the early learning field. While the demand for qualified early childhood educators continues to increase, the field has historically struggled with high turnover due to a multitude of factors, including low wages, high levels of stress, and instability in the workforce. Furthermore, as families experience increased

economic demands and the need for high quality early learning mounts, it is clear that we need to rapidly recruit and retain high performing early educators with diverse of skills including a strong background in child development, knowledge of evidence-based approaches to learning, and frequently the ability to speak multiple languages. The Federal government can help invest in and develop a strong early childhood educator workforce 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.
- 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.
- 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, including 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, identifying the early signs of learning challenges, and effectively serving these students.
- Ensuring that early educators and workers continuing their education and training, have 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.
- Preserving and expanding current loan forgiveness programs that offer targeted incentives to early educators to work in under-resourced communities where early 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 type of provider entity 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 will require an explicit focus on the barriers young children in under-resourced communities face and the necessary steps to provide the comprehensive supports subgroups of students (including low-income students, students of color, Dual Language Learners, students with disabilities and children of immigrant parents, respectively) need to access high-quality and developmentally appropriate content. In addition, 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 attempting to access early learning and childcare services for their children and engaging in their children's early educational experiences. The Federal government should take action by:

- 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 boys of color.
- Ensuring that early education policy supports the critical role providers play in identifying and supporting students with disabilities. Support efforts to bring early screening for speech, language, hearing, vision, and learning difficulties to scale so that early learning and childcare 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 childcare workers outside of a school setting, with practical tools to differentiate acquisition of English and development delays that warrant special education or early intervention.
- Ensuring that all eligible children, regardless of their immigration status or the immigration status of their parents, have access to high-quality early learning programs.

## **FAMILY ENGAGEMENT | Support programs that engage families in meaningful ways**

Parents play a critical role in the development and trajectory of young children. The recently updated Head Start regulations as well as the recently passed Every Student Succeeds Act acknowledge the importance of a two-generation approach and the importance of investing in parental and family involvement activities. In support of this approach, a growing number of nonprofit and community-based organizations are committed to delivering programming that builds this 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. The Federal government should consider proposals to further accelerate this work including:

- Releasing guidance highlighting ways to leverage existing vehicles for funding like Head Start and Title I to promote a multi-generation approach 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 young learners' mental health and mitigate toxic stress. Policies should address the need for community health resources delivered in partnership with early learning providers. Additionally, competitive early learning grants should prioritize programs leveraging whole-child approaches and evidence-based supports.
- Ensuring that parental engagement activities are accessible to all parents, including immigrant parents, parents with disabilities (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 access barriers and serving 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.

## **INVESTMENTS | Protect and increase national investments in high-quality early learning and affordable child care**

Investments in early learning provide life-changing results for our youngest children and substantial returns to society. This is particularly true for children from under-resourced communities, who stand to gain the most from high-quality early learning but are also the least likely to get it.

Our national investments in early childhood programs aim to ensure that children have a fair start in life and the opportunity to enter kindergarten ready to thrive, by supporting affordable early learning and child care programs across the range of local settings in which they exist. Those investments, however, remain woefully insufficient to the scale of the task. Consider Head Start and the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG), part of the Child Care and Development Fund, which together represent the vast majority of the Federal government's investments in early learning or child care. In 2015, Head Start served less than 20 percent of low-income 3- and 4-year-olds, while CCDBG served the smallest number of children in its history. Both Head Start and CCDBG funding, despite modest increases, have failed to keep pace with inflation – while child care costs have continued to increase and the number of poor children under the age of 5 has risen by more than half a million since 2001.

These Federal commitments should be protected and increased to levels necessary to ensure that all children— especially those from under-resourced communities — have meaningful access to high-quality early learning and child care programs. Efforts to empower providers and other grantees to layer, braid, or blend various funding streams to magnify impact and to utilize evidence-based, innovative approaches such as Pay for Success, should be considered. The Federal government should preserve and expand investments in key funding streams, benefits, and programs including those that can help increase access, improve program quality, and drive State and local innovation, such as:

- **Head Start and Early Head Start** - Support the Head Start programs at levels sufficient for them to serve all eligible and interested families.
- **CCDBG** - Support CCDBG at levels sufficient for States to implement the reauthorized law and standards in a way that can serve all eligible and interested families.
- **ESSA** - Provide adequate funding for programs authorized by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that can support early childhood education, such as Title I, Title II-A and Part B, Subpart 2, Title IV, Part C, Title VI, Title IX Preschool Development Grants. Title II-Part B.
- **IDEA**- Support critical programs authorized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that support early childhood opportunities for students with disabilities such as Part B, Section 619, Part C, Part D.
- **MIECHV**- Extend and increase funding for the Maternal Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) to ensure stability for families that rely on these evidence-based home visiting programs and ensure effectiveness of programs and expansion of resources.
- **HEA**- Support investments in programs authorized under the Higher Education Act that help develop and strengthen the early childhood educator workforce and provide critical support for student parents such as Title II, Title IV, Work Study Programs and the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS), and Public Service Loan Forgiveness.
- **National Service**- Maintain funding for the Corporation for National and Community Service and specifically, the National AmeriCorps program, that can support the development of a strong early education workforce and innovative non-governmental partners in early childhood classrooms.
- **Tax incentives**- Preserve and expand tax credits aimed to help ease costs associated with child care for low-income families and those that incentivize employers to reimburse costs associated with child care for their employees' dependents such as: The Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit and Dependent Care Assistance Program.

## In Closing

High-quality early learning is one of the most essential investments we can make to create opportunity for families in this nation. Together, we are working on the ground in local

communities and across the nation to ensure that every child in America enters K12 education with the academic skills, emotional supports, strong adult relationships, and stability they need to succeed in school and in life. Together, we can promote innovation in early childhood education, advance continued research and development, support programs that engage families in meaningful ways, encourage and incentivize partnerships, focus resources on performance and results, invest in building a strong local early educator workforce, protect and increase national investments in high-quality early learning and affordable child care, and prioritize a firm commitment to equity.