



# America Forward on Early Learning

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## **Introduction**

A key element of the work to improve educational outcomes and well-being for students, families, educators, and communities is an intentional focus on high-quality early learning opportunities that support the range of skills necessary for healthy development from birth through age five, and provide every child with the foundation for success. By embracing high quality, culturally and linguistically diverse, holistic approaches to early learning that foster key pre-academic skills; ensuring access to positive early learning environments; and focusing on promising, 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.

Achieving high-quality early learning for every child requires a simultaneous focus on several priorities: innovating and developing evidence to support and replicate effective approaches; leveraging the existing evidence base; building strong and genuine partnerships with families, early learning providers, and community-based organizations to build capacity and expertise; investing in our early learning workforce; and putting equity at the center of everything we do. The federal government and policymakers have a key role to play in advancing these priorities. Through policy and appropriations, federal lawmakers have the opportunity to build a robust foundation that supports our collective goal: ensuring that every child in America has access to early learning opportunities that take into account the full breadth of their individual strengths and developmental needs, and provide the support they need to enter K-12 with the academic skills, emotional supports, meaningful adult relationships, and stability 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 well-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 and utilizing whole-learner school-readiness metrics and advancing 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 that partner 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 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, help structure Pay for Success projects and contracts, and contribute to success payments.
- **Leveraging educational media and other technology 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 low-income communities. Policymakers should also simplify 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 the demonstration authority and promote the development of a strong evidence base, which local grantees can use to improve program 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** that help providers implement evidence-based and whole-learner approaches.
- **Highlighting best practices through stronger guidance**, or considering resources analogous to the National Institutes of Health toolkit that would support the scaling 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 and culturally-responsive 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 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, the experience of many states illustrates 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 support greater coordination by:

- Supporting research, pilots, and demonstrations that **build an evidence base for greater, more accessible funding streams** for early learning providers that 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 design and implement effective educational spaces and curricula, and use existing resources – such as quality improvement dollars – to most effectively 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 historically 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 including between providers, community partners and families** in the Preschool Development Grants.
- Providing additional **clarifying guidance for the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act (CCDBG) program** that highlights examples of effective partnerships that build capacity, increase quality, and expand 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) (or their corollaries), including improving input and outcome measures that are connected with better instruction and improved whole-learner outcomes.

## **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 and process outcomes connected to child outcomes.
- 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 by **requiring appropriate data collection, ongoing monitoring, and evaluation**, as well as providing flexibility for high performing, rigorous programs to continue innovating.
- **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. Additionally, these programs and services should be coordinated to attend to children’s learning needs.
- 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 to measurably improve outcomes for providers, children, and families 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 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 including 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 professionals with 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 early educator salaries lag far behind. Early education BIPOC teachers, bilingual teachers, male-identifying teachers, and those with college degrees are in particularly short supply. 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, library 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, diverse early educators should be paired 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. In addition, professional development opportunities must value the skillsets of early learning professionals, including linguistic and cultural assets that can translate into a higher quality early learning experience for children.

- 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-supported wage supplements and tax credits.
- **Promoting Grow Your Own Program early childhood education teacher programs**, leveraging Title II, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act to bolster efforts to meaningfully diversify the teacher corps and more effectively meet student needs. This could also include partnerships with community colleges to build Grow Your Own Programs and match federal funds with state and local funds.
- Urging states to **prioritize increasing early educator compensation** to promote 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**, including identifying the early signs of learning challenges and effectively serving these students.
- **Ensuring that early educators and workers continue their education and training by providing 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 partnership** 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. AmeriCorps has the ability to pursue interagency agreements, similar to FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) Corps and the Public Health AmeriCorps partnership with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and a similar arrangement could be created with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)/Administration for Children and Families (ACF) to enroll Head Start parents as AmeriCorps members.
- **Incentivize a public-private partnership to fund an Early Childhood Legacy Corps** that offers 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 who work in historically under-resourced communities** where such educators are in short supply. Due to the significantly lower salaries within the early education field, loan forgiveness programs should be expanded to all early educators, regardless of the community in which they serve. Additionally, benefits and incentives should be expanded to include things like child care subsidies, retirement plans, and health care.

**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 historically under-resourced communities to comprehensive supports and high-quality, inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and culturally and linguistically diverse content. Inequities in access disproportionately affect low-income 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 ages of 0-5, we must address the particular barriers that immigrant parents may face while attempting to access early learning and child care services for their children and engage in their children’s early educational experiences. The federal government should take action by:

- Ensuring that **all children**, regardless of their or their family’s socio-economic or immigration status, **have access to high-quality and effective early learning programs.**
- Incentivize support, through a tiered funding model, to **non-traditional and innovative providers** like 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 on 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 policies support 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 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 developmental delays that warrant special education or early intervention.**
- **Funding a national recruitment campaign on college campuses for early childhood educators,** targeting men and campuses with high percentages of Black and Latino/a/x students.
- **Increasing funding to ensure that access points to early learning opportunities are seamless and efficient.** One important aspect is reducing the amount of paperwork involved in accessing early learning programs, including simplifying proof of income and re-determination periods.
- **Creating opportunities for early childhood program collaboration with family economic security programs,** in recognition of the fact that whole family needs impact early childhood outcomes.
- **Closing long-term economic opportunity gaps for babies born into lower socio-economic households** by looking at publicly-sponsored, long-term child savings investments for future high return investments like college attendance, home ownership, and retirement.

- **Developing economic incentive programs to match state funds and provide tax credits to lower-socioeconomic families.** Funding should be done in easy ways that support families, such as being paid in monthly installments.

### **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 can offer crucial lived experience and valuable guidance. The updated Head Start regulations and 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 focus, 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 by:

- **Releasing guidance highlighting ways to leverage existing funding vehicles,** like Head Start and Title I, to promote a multi-generational approach to family engagement and place an emphasis on community partnerships that effectively knit together programs that engage and empower parents and caregivers in meaningful ways.
- **Integrating trauma-informed policies into existing early learning programs** to support the whole-learner, address 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, and also prioritize collaboration among institutions and community based and faith-based organizations.
- **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 for whom language barriers and lack of access to systems create obstacles to engagement in their children's early learning opportunities.
- Ensuring that any reauthorization of major early learning laws or related legislation **encourages both state-level and program-level staff to systematically integrate parental and caregiver voice during the implementation process.**
- 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 to build caregiver capacity. 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**

Looking ahead, we see enormous opportunity to work collaboratively towards early learning policies that expand opportunity, embrace innovation, leverage science and evidence, and meaningfully advance equity for all students. In the face of persistent challenges, we are determined to continue amplifying the voices of our Coalition members; advocating for Federal action to expand effective, evidence-based, community-based solutions; and building 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 leads a Coalition of more than 100 social innovation organizations across the country. Every day, these organizations are working in 15,000 communities nationwide, impacting more than 9 million lives every year.

Together, America Forward Coalition members advocate for public policies that foster innovation, identify effective solutions, reward results, catalyze cross-sector partnerships, and advance equity in workforce development, education, early childhood, and poverty alleviation. Since 2007, our Coalition organizations have successfully advocated for lasting policy change; 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.