



America Forward Policy Platform on Early Learning

Ratified February 2026

Introduction

Our youngest learners depend on high-quality, accessible early learning opportunities to develop the range of skills they need for their healthy development. Early learning environments must provide all young students with a strong foundation for success throughout their academic careers and in the workforce. At the same time, parents and caregivers depend on early learning and child care to enter and remain in the workforce without sacrificing career growth and economic opportunity, and cradle-to-career policies should align early learning investments with workforce outcomes such as credential attainment and entry into high-growth industries that afford family-sustaining wages.

However, today too many children and their families lack effective access to evidence-based, supportive early learning opportunities. We must expand early learning opportunities and strengthen investment in the development and expansion of innovative, responsive, evidence-based approaches – including strategies that leverage whole learner approaches that address early learners’ holistic needs. Our early learning system should incorporate a stronger focus on results for all learners by leveraging strong partnerships with high impact stakeholders. We must also strengthen our early learning workforce, including building a more effective, accessible pipeline for educators. And we must adequately invest in our early learning system and ensure that all families have effective, accessible means to make informed choices and engage in their children’s early learning.

The America Forward Coalition unites non-governmental organizations at the forefront of developing, delivering, and facilitating high-quality early learning opportunities across our nation. Together, we call on policymakers to move us closer toward ensuring that every child in America can access high-quality early learning, every family can make the early learning choices that are best for them, and every early learning provider has what they need to enable every child to thrive in school and in life. The America Forward Coalition calls on federal policymakers to take action in early learning aligned with the following priorities through such vehicles as Head Start reauthorization, Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization, and federal appropriations:

- 1) Invest in Evidence-Based Strategies and Innovation
- 2) Encourage and Incentivize High-Impact Partnerships
- 3) Emphasize Performance, Improvement, and Results
- 4) Invest in Building a Strong Early Educator Workforce
- 5) Provide the Critical Conditions and Supports for Early Learning

1) Invest in Evidence-Based Strategies and Innovation

While the impact of high-quality early learning experiences is well-documented, continued practitioner-led innovation is desperately needed to advance foundational research, pilot cutting-edge models, scale best practices and expand access across the country – from whole learner practices that advance school readiness, to early literacy approaches grounded in science. The federal government is uniquely positioned to promote and accelerate innovation across the diverse settings in which early education and child care take place in partnership with states, local governments, and groundbreaking non-governmental providers. Federal policymakers should:

- **Invest in and leverage evidence-based partnerships** between early childhood researchers and high-impact operators, both within and outside the traditional early learning system, to take the latest science to scale and improve the effectiveness and efficiency of early learning systems. We support investing in the piloting, testing, refining, and scaling of evidence-based early childhood strategies through, or in complement to, the longstanding Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program that centers practitioners as leaders in innovation.
- **Increase 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.
- **Increase the amount of Head Start program funds devoted to research, demonstration, and evaluation** to one percent of total appropriations, in order to enhance the demonstration authority and promote the development of a strong evidence base which local grantees can use to improve program quality and outcomes, alongside expanding support for state- and locally-driven evaluation efforts. We also support the development of clear and comprehensive, contextually relevant measurements of whole child development to support the creation and implementation of high-quality programs.
- **Expand technical assistance, research, and dissemination of best practices in early childhood education.** Policymakers should strengthen support through Comprehensive Centers and a rebuilt Institute of Education Sciences (IES) and its Regional Education Labs (RELs), targeted at effective implementation of evidence-based approaches, including contextually relevant practices that meet children’s individual needs.
- **Reform federal training and technical assistance (T&TA) funding** under Head Start to be awarded through competitive processes that prioritize provider performance and demonstrable improvements in outcomes for children, families, and program quality, while opening the T&TA system to new, evidence-based innovations.
- **Leverage funding incentives and priorities to support the use of federal, state, and local funds for evidence-based and innovative strategies in areas such as early and family literacy**, including encouraging strong coordination across agencies and with

the K-12 system and to align across funding streams. One major priority should be investment in evidence-based early and multi-generational family literacy approaches along with continued efforts to build the evidence base in different settings across the country.

- **Encourage the adoption and effective use of High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM).** Policymakers should incentivize states and early learning programs to implement evidence-based instructional materials aligned with the science of early learning and development.
- **Support efforts to strengthen and streamline privacy-protected use of administrative data systems.** This includes increasing capacity to manage and implement data sharing between early learning settings, K-12 schools, post-secondary education institutions, workforce systems, and external partners, to support high-quality evaluation and continuous improvement of early learning programs. We also encourage agencies to leverage administrative data to track longitudinal outcomes and build evidence by continuing to track the impact of early childhood programs. For example, agencies can use such data to measure third-grade reading and math scores and assess other long-term measures including reductions in child welfare and justice involvement, the attainment of postsecondary credentials and employment, and parental employment. At the same time, policymakers should ensure such data is excluded from inappropriate use for immigration enforcement and ensure that longitudinal tracking is de-identified to protect vulnerable families.
- **Leverage educational media and other innovative technology solutions** to support student learning, ensure digital equity, and encourage family engagement in an age-appropriate, intentional way aligned with the evidence base.

2) Encourage and Incentivize High-Impact Partnerships

Our nation’s mixed-delivery approach to early childhood education and child care requires intentional, strategic policy design to emphasize results, cut down on red tape, and ultimately expand access to innovative, high-impact strategies in partnership with federal, state, and local governments and non-governmental providers. As a starting point, policymakers should support greater coordination across the system by:

- **Supporting the adoption and growth of high-quality partnerships** that help providers implement evidence-based approaches, including whole learner strategies, by permitting and elevating locally-driven efforts to redirect existing federal investments in capacity, training, and technical assistance in early childhood. This includes emphasizing partnerships between providers, communities, and families in Preschool Development Grants and other funding streams, as well as enabling and strengthening partnership opportunities through efforts such as the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships. We support efforts to leverage new tax credits in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) to support strong partnerships, as well as expanding tax incentives to stimulate and increase private sector investments in high-quality and high-

impact early learning programs and initiatives.

- **Demonstrating what effective partnerships look like.** The federal government should provide technical assistance supporting early learning providers in identifying, prioritizing, and selecting external partners that can offer critical expertise, capacity, and evidence-based results. In addition, policymakers should provide clarifying guidance for programs such as Child Care Development Block Grants (CCDBG) that highlights examples of effective partnerships that build capacity, increase quality, and expand whole learner supports.
- **Strengthening the system through collaboration with high-quality partners and intermediary organizations.** Policymakers should leverage the insights 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 the input and outcome measures that reflect better instruction and improved whole-learner outcomes. In addition, these non-governmental partners can play a pivotal role in partnering with educators to design and implement effective educational spaces and curricula, and to use existing resources like quality improvement dollars to most effectively advance evidence-based 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.
- **Removing administrative, regulatory, and funding barriers that limit effective early learning partnerships.** Policymakers should identify and reduce barriers that make it difficult for early childhood providers to partner with community-based organizations, Head Start agencies, school districts, and other external partners—such as duplicative licensing requirements, misaligned eligibility rules, fragmented procurement processes, and restrictive data-sharing policies. Streamlining guidance and aligning requirements across distinct but complementary programs like CCDBG, Head Start, Early Head Start, and Preschool Development Grants (PDG) would enable providers to focus more fully on quality improvement and family-centered service delivery.
- **Enabling and expanding the braiding and blending of federal funds to support high-quality early learning partnerships.** Early childhood providers often rely on multiple funding streams—including CCDBG, Head Start/Early Head Start, PDG B-5, IDEA Part C, and workforce and health funding—but face challenges coordinating them due to siloed rules and reporting requirements. In consultation with state agencies and program operators, policymakers should clarify allowable uses, align timelines and accountability structures, and provide technical assistance to help states and communities strategically braid funds to sustain comprehensive, evidence-based partnerships that improve access, quality, and outcomes for young children and families.

- **Ensuring 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.

3) Emphasize Performance, Improvement, 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, developing metrics that assess whole-learner school readiness and process outcomes connected to child outcomes. Specifically, we support encouraging QRIS systems nationwide to use tiered reimbursement models to better align incentives along these goals and support the adoption of evidence-based approaches provided by high-quality technical assistance partners or early childhood support organizations. Similarly, we support emphasizing investment in models that expand early learning screening and early intervention services proven to drive better outcomes, as well as ongoing reforms 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 meet and support children’s individualized learning needs.
- **Incentivizing states and communities to create high-quality charter preschools** designed to improve school readiness outcomes by leveraging existing programs such as Preschool Development Grants, Child Care Development Block Grants, and the charter school program.
- **Leveraging pay-for-success approaches** that offer providers flexibility to administer programs with fewer input-driven requirements as long as they meet specific outcome measures and provide additional funding to those programs that have strong positive outcomes. Policymakers should support pilots and rigorous testing of innovative financing models that leverage pay-for-success approaches to advance evidence-based strategies, taking lessons from models like the Social Impact Partnership to Pay for Results Act (SIPPPRA) projects that involve early learning. These approaches should, to the extent possible, prioritize growth and consider long-term health and stability outcomes beyond simply student achievement scores.
- **Driving continuous improvement by requiring appropriate data collection, ongoing monitoring, and evaluation as part of performance management, including early and multi-generational family literacy metrics.** At the same time, policymakers should provide flexibility for high performing, rigorous programs to continue innovating, including by allowing QRIS systems to consider non-traditional and innovative approaches such as Friends, Family, and Neighbor (FFN) and dual-language programs. Early as well as family literacy measures should be a key focus of these efforts.

4) Invest in Building a Strong Early Educator Workforce

A growing body of evidence demonstrates that a well-trained, supported, and representative early childhood workforce are essential to drive stronger 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 continue to lag far behind while an array of barriers limit access to early learning careers. We must strengthen recruitment, preparation, retention, and support for high-performing educators to serve all of our nation's children and their families. Federal policies and initiatives can support a stronger early educator workforce by:

- **Investing in early educator training, compensation and support.** Policymakers should promote and highlight strategies that states use to encourage and reward continuing education, training, and retention of early childhood educators, such as state supported wage supplements and tax credits, to promote parity in total compensation (e.g., healthcare, benefits) between early educators and similarly-credentialed elementary teachers in public K-12 systems in concert with increased evidence-based professional development opportunities. We also support efforts to preserve and expand 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.
- **Strengthening the Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) grant program** to explicitly prioritize early childhood educator training by supporting eligible partnerships that choose to focus on innovative development for early educators, such as initiatives that increase compensation for early childhood educators who attain associate or baccalaureate degrees in early childhood education.
- **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.
- **Increase federal investment in early educator professional development and career advancement** by expanding high-quality, ongoing training opportunities that support recruitment, retention, and workforce stability, including apprenticeships. Federal policy should pair these investments with initiatives that recognize excellence and elevate the early education profession; promote holistic, engaging, and developmentally appropriate professional learning approaches—including digital learning for educators and students; value educators' linguistic and cultural assets; and ensure training equips early educators to address harmful trends in early learning settings, including the disproportionate suspension and expulsion of students in certain populations (e.g., students with disabilities).
- **Strengthening the workforce to support Dual Language Learners.** We encourage efforts to expand the growth of Dual Language programming, recruitment of bilingual educators, and

contextually relevant preparation. In addition, we support strengthening training programs to highlight that, even in early learning settings, Dual Language Learners may be erroneously recommended for special education services, and providing 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.

- **Strengthen federal policy governing educator preparation programs to require coursework and supervised clinical experience focused on students with disabilities and learning differences**, including early identification of learning challenges and effective, inclusive instructional practices.
- **Invest in and reform early educator education and training systems** to ensure educators can continue their professional development through accessible, multilingual supports and flexible delivery models—such as evening, online, and hybrid options—while adopting a whole-learner approach that strengthens workforce diversity, supports educator advancement, and helps address persistent compensation disparities across early education roles.
- **Supporting service partnerships to bolster the workforce.** We encourage 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.
- **Support partnership between Head Start and AmeriCorps** to enable Head Start parents to serve in their children's centers as AmeriCorps members and gain eligibility for Segal AmeriCorps education awards, allowing them to earn a college degree or other credential.

5) Provide the Critical Conditions and Supports for Early Learning

We support structural improvements to early learning policy that will expand access and enhance quality with a particular focus on addressing barriers for students who are least well-served by the present system. Policymakers should prioritize reforms that provide comprehensive supports and high-quality, inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and contextually relevant content to underserved populations including low-income students, students of color, Dual Language Learners, students with disabilities, and students with learning differences. In addition, our policies must recognize that children of immigrants comprise the fastest growing segment of children between the ages of 0-5.

First, the federal government should address significant barriers to participation, including:

- **Ensuring that all children have access to high-quality and effective early learning programs**, including Head Start, regardless of their or their family's socio-economic or immigration status by boosting overall funding levels to support both access and program quality. This also includes promoting the long-term sustainability of community-based providers, such as through the use of stable contracts, ensuring families' payments are affordable, and implementing provider payment structures that recognize fixed operational costs.

- **Ensure certainty in public funding.** Recent federal funding pauses and cuts have caused major challenges across our education system. Districts, communities, and providers cannot properly pursue efforts to improve student outcomes in a climate of uncertainty. Policymakers must ensure the predictable, reliable delivery of critical funding streams, including the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG). This includes prohibiting the use of blanket administrative freezes and ensuring federal administration of funds remains uninterrupted and fully-staffed.
- **Integrating trauma-informed policies into existing early learning programs** to support the whole learner approaches, 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.
- **Protecting children's privacy and learning environments.** To maintain trauma-informed learning spaces, policymakers should provide clarifying guidance to ensure children's physical and digital safety and privacy by preventing unauthorized, inappropriate recording, and intrusion within early learning environments. We support the implementation of evidence-based security protocols that empower providers to maintain trauma-informed learning spaces free from digital exploitation and disruption, ensuring that public access standards do not compromise the safety or privacy of young learners and their families."
- **Incentivize policies that emphasize counseling, mental health services, and other evidence-based approaches over exclusionary practices.** Evidence shows that the disproportionate use of exclusionary punishments in preschool leads 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.
- **Strengthen early learning supports for children with intellectual disabilities and learning disabilities.** Policymakers should ensure early childhood programs have the resources, training, and technical assistance needed to identify developmental delays early and deliver inclusive, evidence-based instruction and supports. This includes strengthening coordination across IDEA Part B and C, Head Start, Early Head Start, and child care systems, including reforms that eliminate the service cliff during the transition from IDEA Part C (Early Intervention) to Part B (Preschool Special Education); expanding access to inclusive early learning environments; and supporting partnerships with specialized providers and

community-based organizations to ensure children with disabilities and learning differences can fully participate and thrive.

- **Aligning early learning and family economic security programs.** The needs of the whole family impact early childhood outcomes. We encourage policymakers to ensure that all families can easily take advantage of the new tax benefits for families under the One Big Beautiful Bill Act and to advance legislation that expands these provisions' benefits for low-income families, such as ensuring lower-income families can leverage the full Child Tax Credit as well as expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit. We also support efforts to build on the Trump Accounts and provide economic security for children in low-income households.
- **Creating a dedicated source of funding to support the acquisition, construction, and renovation of early childhood facilities.** Facilities access is a major barrier to expanding access to all families. New investment would ensure that children, families, and providers in urban and rural communities utilize spaces that are healthy, safe, and conducive to high quality play-based care.

Second, we urge policymakers to particularly recognize the importance of family engagement in their children's education, beginning in early learning and continuing through the K-12 system, and leveraging evidence-based family engagement models developed by community-based organizations nationwide. Parents, guardians, and families play a critical role in the development and trajectory of young children and offer crucial lived experience and perspectives to inform the design and implementation of their children's early learning. Robust evidence demonstrates the critical connection between, for example, early and family literacy. The federal government should further accelerate this work by:

- **Releasing guidance highlighting ways to leverage existing funding vehicles,** like Head Start and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, to promote a multi-generational approach to family engagement and place an emphasis on community partnerships and effectively knitting together programs that engage and empower parents and caregivers in meaningful ways. These efforts should include a significant focus on family literacy.
- **Encouraging states, localities, and providers to provide fair access to all families.** Policymakers should encourage 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. In addition, guidance should emphasize ensuring that family engagement activities are accessible to all families, such as by addressing language barriers or supporting family members with disabilities and learning differences.
- **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. Policymakers should consider, for example, the recent model of the strongly bipartisan Title IV-B child welfare reauthorization bill, the

Supporting America's Children and Families Act, that requires states to consult with families and youth with lived experience in the development of state plans.

Conclusion

Looking ahead, we see enormous opportunity to find common ground and work collaboratively towards early childhood education policies that expand opportunity, embrace innovation, leverage science and evidence, and meaningfully advance outcomes for all students. 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 accessible, fair, high-quality systems that support students, educators, workers, nonprofit leaders, and families in all 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 unites social entrepreneurs with policymakers to promote a public policy agenda that fosters innovation, rewards results, and catalyzes cross-sector partnerships. America Forward leads the America Forward Coalition, a network of 100+ of the nation's most impactful and innovative non-governmental organizations that develop and advocate for more effective public policies to advance opportunity and move all of America forward.

America Forward Coalition members achieve high impact, measurable outcomes in more than 15,000 communities nationwide, touching the lives of over 9 million Americans each year, and driving progress in early child care and learning, K-12 and post-secondary education, youth mental health and wellbeing, economic mobility and workforce development, evidence-based policy, social innovation, national service, and civic participation. Since 2007, America Forward's community of entrepreneurs has played a leading role in driving the national dialogue on social innovation policy and impact.