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ABSTRACT

The development of a high quality system of early care and education requires the attention, investment, and action of several groups, including parents, business leaders and philanthropists, teachers, media, and policymakers. This report, produced by the Education Commission of the States (ECS) as part of its Early Learning: Improving Results for Young Children initiative, is designed to serve as a practical guide for policymakers and others to use in their efforts to build systematic and sustainable reform of early care and education. The report features an overview of why the issue of early care and education has emerged as a critical public policy issue and why policymakers should pay attention to it. The report also examines issues policymakers face as they grapple with early care and education, including confusing terms, and complex and sometimes conflicting public perceptions and values, with tips for dealing with these challenges. Critical components of an effective early care and education system are reviewed. Also described are some innovative approaches being used by states to improve voluntary, high-quality, and accessible early care and education. Finally, the report provides a checklist for state policymakers interested in moving forward with strategic planning and implementation of early childhood policy, including a list of useful readings, Web sites, and other resources. (Contains 30 endnotes.) (KB)



STARTING EARLY STARTING NOW

POLICYMAKER'S GUIDE

TO EARLY CARE & EDUCATION AND SCHOOL SUCCESS

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STARTING EARLY, STARTING NOW:

A POLICYMAKER'S GUIDE TO EARLY CARE & EDUCATION AND SCHOOL SUCCESS

*“What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child,
that must the community want for all of its children.”*

- JOHN DEWEY



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LETTER FROM THE ECS CHAIRMAN



Last year, when I became chairman of the Education Commission of the States (ECS), I dedicated my term to launching *Early Learning: Improving Results for Young Children*, an ECS initiative designed to focus attention on the critical importance of the early years in children's lives.

Today, we are more aware than ever of the inextricable link between our economy, quality of life and education. Technology has changed the way we live and work and learn, thrusting us into an age when information, ideas and innovation are crucial to the productivity of our workforce, the vitality of our communities and the strength of our increasingly global economy. These new demands and challenges have placed an unprecedented focus on the need for a high-quality, high-performance public education system.

I believe if we, as public policy leaders, are serious about responding to the demand for higher standards and better performance, we cannot ignore the research that shows a clear and compelling connection between the quality of children's learning experiences and later success in school and in life.

Children who receive high-quality early education are less likely to drop out of school, less likely to repeat grades, less likely to need special education and less likely to get into trouble with the law. Conversely, children who do not get the early learning experiences they need typically arrive at kindergarten lagging behind their classmates in what they know and are able to do. Our chances of success with these children are already diminished when they arrive at school and continue to deteriorate over time, while the cost of interventions designed to reverse a poor start only increase over time. Yet our children's early years, those from birth to school entry, receive less attention from policymakers, and lower levels of public investment, than any other stage in children's journey toward adulthood.

Over the past year, ECS and I have focused our efforts on bringing the message about the importance of early learning to a wider audience. We have hosted meetings with leaders in 20 states to help build and strengthen the partnerships essential to achieving meaningful and sustainable change. We have met with media representatives to discuss early care and education issues and how they affect each of us at a personal and a societal level. And, we have strived to provide the best information available, via the ECS Web site and various publications, to help state leaders make informed policy choices and wise investment decisions.

This report, *Starting Early, Starting Now*, should serve as a valuable and practical guide for policymakers as they navigate their way through the field of early care and education. It provides an overview of the most compelling issues and questions that policymakers face on this important subject. What is early care and education? Why should policymakers be involved? How can the agenda be moved forward? How can states learn from one another? This report is intended to offer specific strategies for bringing the right tools, the right people and the right focus to bear on the issue. The right time is now. Our children are the most important resource we have. To wait is to risk losing a precious opportunity to help children get the start they need to excel in school and grow up to be confident, caring and contributing adults.

ECS and I are committed to continuing to work with states to strengthen and improve public policies for early care and education, and to bringing best practices to the forefront so that we can all learn from one another.

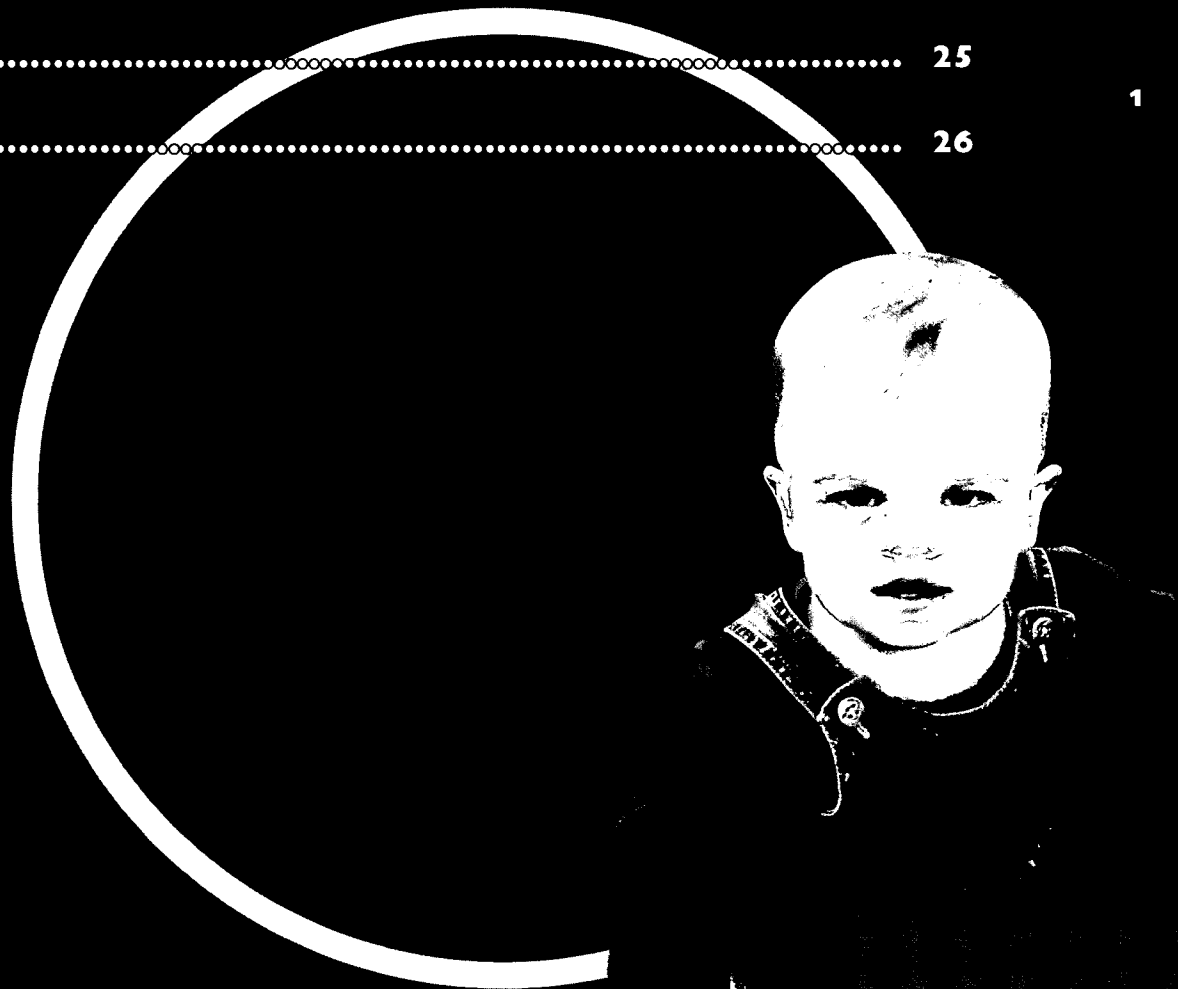
I invite you to join me in renewing and strengthening our commitment to children from birth to school entry, and in working together to ensure that our children receive the care and education they need to succeed in school and beyond.

Jeanne Shaheen
Governor of New Hampshire
2000-01 ECS Chairman

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research has established a clear and compelling connection between the quality of children's learning experiences and later success in school and in life. Yet our children's early years, those from birth to school entry, receive less attention from policymakers, and lower levels of public investment, than any other stage in children's journey toward adulthood.

Over the past decade, many states have exhibited high levels of creativity, leadership and commitment in addressing early care and education, but these efforts, for the most part, have been piecemeal, involving selected components of systems and specific program improvements. As a result, what the nation continues to have is not so much a system of early care and education as a "nonsystem" – a conglomeration of programs and policies largely disconnected from one another and from other levels of the education system. Filling the gaps and building a high-quality system of early care and education require the attention, investment and action of many people – parents and families, business leaders and philanthropists, teachers and preachers, senior citizens and students, media and policymakers.

This report, produced by the Education Commission of the States (ECS) as part of its *Early Learning: Improving Results for Young Children* initiative, is designed to serve as a practical guide for policymakers and others to use in their efforts to build systematic and sustainable reform of early care and education. It features:

- **An overview of why the issue of early care and education has emerged as a critical public policy issue, and why policymakers should pay attention to it.**
- **A look at the thorny issues policymakers face as they grapple with early care and education – including confusing terms, and complex and sometimes conflicting public perceptions and values – and some tips for dealing with these challenges.**
- **A review of what generally are agreed to be the critical components of an effective early care and education system, along with a roundup of some of the innovative approaches being used by states to improve voluntary, high-quality and accessible early care and education.**
- **A checklist for state policymakers interested in moving forward with strategic planning and implementation of early childhood policy, including a list of useful readings, Web sites and other resources.**

INTRODUCTION

In 1989, President George Bush and the nation's governors agreed to a set of National Education Goals, the first of which was to ensure that every American child has the care and developmental support required to arrive at the schoolhouse door, at age 5 or 6, ready to succeed. In doing so, they borrowed an idea from American philosopher and educator John Dewey who, in 1910, declared that "what the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children."

Today, the nation continues to fall far short of this goal, and another President Bush calls on the nation to work to ensure that "no child is left behind."



Across the nation, there is strong and growing concern about whether young children are prepared to succeed in school and in life. Indeed, over the past decade, most states have exhibited high levels of creativity, leadership and commitment in addressing early care and education, although these efforts, for the most part, have been piecemeal, involving selected components of systems and specific program improvements.

ECS' work with states has revealed major gaps in state policy and policymaking – the lack of a common understanding about why early learning is important, the lack of a common language to talk about the issues, the lack of shared values to shape early childhood public policy and the lack of a clear sense of “where do we go from here?” These gaps create enormous difficulties for policymakers as they grapple with complex issues such as uncoordinated services, poor and/or uneven quality, inadequate teacher preparation and limited capacity for planning and evaluation.

For example:

Despite significant increases in federal funding, programs such as Head Start, child care subsidies and state-funded preschool continue to fall short of serving all eligible children.

Part-day, part-year program models, such as Head Start, no longer meet the needs of parents working full time.

Child care quality studies show that most programs are of mediocre quality at best, and an alarming proportion are of such poor quality as to threaten children's well-being.¹

While many employers are involved in early care and learning in some fashion, they typically view it as a family issue, in contrast to the way they view K-12 education reform – as an investment in the quality of their communities and future workforce.

There is a striking disconnect between Head Start, the more general world of early care and learning, and the K-12 education system. This disconnect manifests itself in a lack of shared understanding and alignment of learning expectations for young children; little collaboration on professional development; discontinuities in developmentally appropriate practices, curriculum and the classroom environment; and scant attention to helping children and parents make smooth transitions from one level of the education system to the next.

In short, early care and education is not so much a system as a “nonsystem” – a conglomeration of programs and policies largely disconnected from one another and from other levels of the education system. Filling the gaps and building a high-quality system of early care and education requires the attention, investment and action of many people – parents and families, business leaders and philanthropists, teachers and preachers, senior citizens and students, media and policymakers.

Today, many people are recognizing the need for profound shifts in thinking about the basic structure of education for children, and there is heightened recognition of the crucial interconnectedness between systems and programs. The goal of making sure that “all children in America will start school ready to learn,” as first articulated by the nation's leaders 12 years ago, continues to be a worthy one.

Early Care and Education

Throughout this report, the term “early care and education” is used to encompass the full range of services and programs used by families to educate and nurture their children from birth to school entry. These programs are funded and administered by a diverse range of public agencies and private (both nonprofit and for-profit) providers. All of these programs and providers should be considered and included in discussions about public policy that benefits young children.



WHY SHOULD POLICYMAKERS PAY ATTENTION?

With so many urgent education policy issues in the news every day – school violence, testing, teaching quality and school finance, to name just a few – why should policymakers devote precious time and energy to early care and education? There are four major arguments for why policymakers should be concerned about this issue:

- **Intellectually** – Science has produced a large and compelling body of evidence on the critical influence of early care and learning on children’s success in school and beyond.
- **Morally** – American family demographics are changing. As stewards of the public good, policymakers have a responsibility to address the social realities our families face.
- **Financially** – Research studies show the cost-effectiveness of early childhood programs. Investing in early care and education saves America money in the long run.
- **Emotionally** – High-quality early care and education programs are an embodiment of the vision of John Dewey – that all children deserve the country’s best effort.

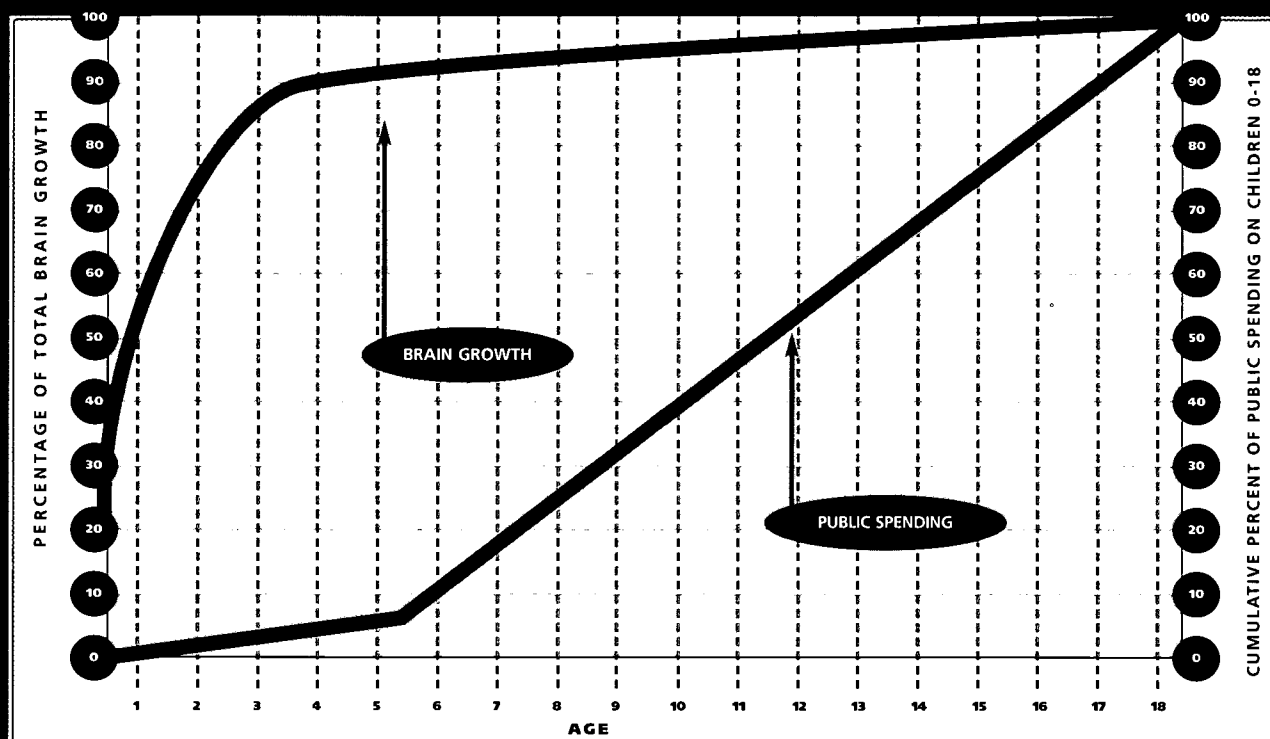
SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE

The first five years of life are particularly critical to children’s early learning. Since the 1994 release of the Carnegie Corporation’s *Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children*, much attention has been paid to the science of the brain. Researchers have thoroughly documented the molecular biology of the nervous system and the brain’s astounding period of development during the first three years of life. Key brain research findings include:

- **The brain development that takes place before age 1 is rapid and extensive. By age 2, a child’s brain has twice as many synapses – or connections – as an adult’s. These synapses are a fundamental basis of learning.**
- **Brain development is much more vulnerable to environmental influences than suspected. It’s not nature or nurture – it’s both. The brain changes and adapts to its environment (positive or negative) and begins to eliminate the excess neurons and synapses. A stimulating environment (reading, singing, talking and playing with a young child) is essential to brain growth. Conversely, a harmful environment (one with exposure to toxins, malnutrition and a lack of interaction with nurturing adults) can damage brain development. The influence of these experiences and environments in the first years of life is long-lasting.**

As is true in most subjects, what is not known far exceeds what is known. Brain development is no exception.² There is, however, a steadily growing body of scientific evidence that the quality of young children’s environment and social experience lays the groundwork for success in school and has a decisive impact on the rest of children’s lives. This knowledge translates into an opportunity for policymakers to promote healthy development, and to reduce risks, in the early years of children’s lives.

Brain Growth Versus Public Expenditures on Children Age 0-18



Source: Brain development: Figure 2.4 in D. Purves, *Body and Brain*, Harvard University Press, 1988, adapted from D.W. Thompson, *On Growth and Form*, Cambridge University Press, 1961. Public spending on children: Derived from Table 1 in R. Haveman and B. Wolfe, "The Determinants of Children's Attainments: A Review of Methods and Findings," *Journal of Economic Literature*, Vol. 33, December 1995, pp. 1829-1878.

CHANGING FAMILIES

For most of this country's history, the typical family was one with a stay-at-home mother and an employed father. In the last 25 years, things have changed dramatically.

Today, there are more women in the workforce than ever before. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2000, 53% of married mothers with infants (under age 1) – and 59% of unmarried mothers with infants – were in the labor force. Among mothers with children under age 3, more than 60% were in the labor force in 2000.³ Most infants and toddlers of these employed mothers – 73% – are in nonparental care.⁴

One crucial variable in women's workforce participation is the inadequacy of America's family leave policies. Unlike many other industrialized nations, the United States does not provide paid family leave at childbirth. The Family and Medical Leave Act, enacted in 1993, is limited in its support for families. The 12-week job-protected leave not only is unpaid, but currently does not apply to companies with fewer than 50 employees. And, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 1998, approximately 83% of all employers in the nation had fewer than 50 employees.

Today, more women are working out of necessity. More women are the heads of households or substantially contributing to household expenses. Contradicting prevailing perceptions that women's incomes are secondary to men's, a 1998 Whirlpool Foundation report found that the majority of women workers contribute more than half – 57% on average – of total annual household income. According to women, their wages not only help provide essentials but also contribute to a better quality of life for their families. In some cases, with the volatile high-tech economy, women seek employment or hold on to their current jobs as insurance against changes in their spouse's employment situation.

Today, there are more single parents. Nearly one in five employed parents is single, and more workers are raising children alone than 25 years ago.⁵ While divorce accounts for most single-parent homes, an increasing number of children are being born to nonmarried mothers.⁶

In addition, as a result of welfare reform, more and more low-income families are required to enter the workforce when their children are babies. An overwhelming number of these families need someone to care for their children while they work. For these families, safe, stable and affordable child care may make the difference between climbing out of poverty and falling deeper into it.

ECS' Early Learning Initiative

Over the past year, ECS has engaged 20 states in exploring early childhood care and education issues through regional workshops and the provision of state-specific technical assistance. One of the important lessons learned from these sessions is that policymakers rarely have the luxury of time away from their ongoing responsibilities to reflect thoughtfully and plan strategically to improve services and systems for young children and their families. ECS regional early learning workshops have provided just such an opportunity, coupled with timely information and the chance to interact with national experts. By early 2002, ECS will have offered such workshops to representatives from all 50 states.

In addition, ECS has developed a comprehensive Web site featuring a synthesis of the latest research on early learning issues, suggested readings, links and up-to-date searchable databases on prekindergarten programs and early childhood legislation across the states. For a look at this unique set of resources, visit the Education Issues section of the ECS Web site at www.ecs.org and click on Early Childhood.

We welcome your participation in ECS' Early Learning Initiative, as well as your comments on this report. Please address correspondence to kkauerz@ecs.org.

COST-EFFECTIVENESS

American citizens rely on policymakers to be prudent in spending public dollars, and scarce financial resources must be used wisely. One of the most compelling aspects of high-quality early care and education programs is the mounting evidence that these programs are cost-effective and help prevent later, more costly social interventions.

A number of credible studies offer evidence that enriched, high-quality early care and education programs have long-lasting effects on participating children. The best-known studies are the North Carolina Abecedarian Project, the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers. In the Abecedarian Project, children had long-term gains in IQ, reading and math scores. Follow-up reports when the children were 21 years old showed that participants, on average, were older at the time their first child was born and more likely to have attended a four-year college than their peers who had not participated in the early childhood program.

Similarly, at age 27, Perry Preschool children were less likely to have been arrested, had mean monthly earnings almost double those of control-group members (\$1,219 vs. \$766) and were much less likely to be receiving public assistance (15% vs. 32%). Finally, children who had participated in the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, which are administered through the public schools, were shown to have significantly higher math and reading scores, lower grade-retention rates, higher high school completion rates and significantly lower rates of juvenile arrests than children not in the program.⁷

The positive effects revealed in these studies have been calculated to yield a significant return on the initial investment. For every dollar invested in high-quality, comprehensive early care and education, society saves \$7.16 in welfare, special education and criminal justice costs.

In their book *The Irreducible Needs of Children*, pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton and child psychiatrist Stanley I. Greenspan conclude: "Early childhood is both the most critical and the most vulnerable time in any child's development. Our research, and that of others, demonstrates that in the first few years, the ingredients for intellectual, emotional and moral growth are laid down. If they are not, it is true that a developing child can still acquire them, but the price rises and the chances of success decrease with each subsequent year. We cannot fail children in these early years."⁸

DESERVING OF THE BEST

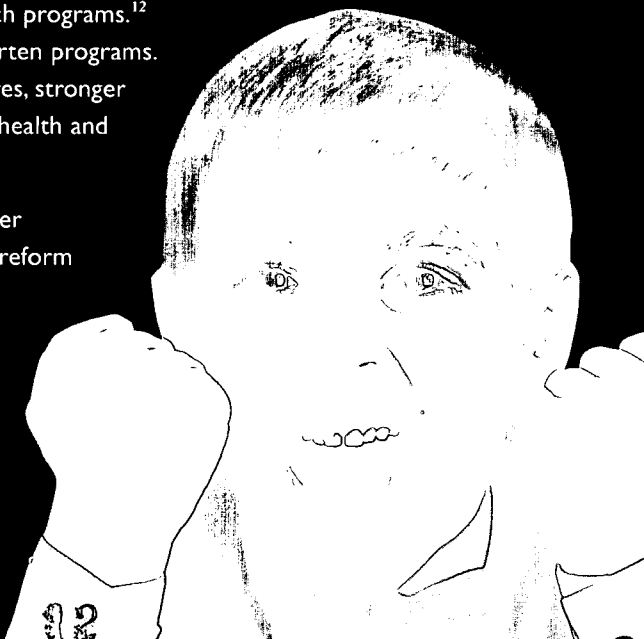
Today's technological society and fast-paced economy demand citizens be better educated than ever before. School reform measures that impose higher standards and accountability for student performance are heightening the pressure on elementary schools to ensure that all children succeed, even those who arrive at their doors ill-prepared. High-quality early care and education programs help prepare children for the social and academic challenges of school.

A longitudinal study by the U.S. Department of Education shows that as children begin school and enter kindergarten, their knowledge and skills already differ.⁹ Forty-six percent of kindergarten teachers report that at least half of their pupils have specific problems with entry into kindergarten, including difficulty following directions, lack of academic skills, disorganized home environments and/or difficulty working independently.¹⁰ Even more troubling, the gap continues to widen even in the kindergarten year; those children most at risk for later school difficulty typically do not catch up with their peers during the year.¹¹ Although these children may gain basic reading and math skills, they tend to fall behind their peers in acquiring more sophisticated learning concepts.

A number of studies, including one published in April 2001 by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, confirm that high-quality early care and education experiences have positive effects on the intellectual and language skills of participating children. Such programs help children develop basic cognitive skills (language and math) and classroom behavioral skills (attention, sociability, peer relations, self-management). These skills are critical to later academic performance and school success.

The school readiness skills gained in early childhood not only are important for the transition to kindergarten, but also carry on into the elementary years. The *Children of the Cost, Quality and Outcomes Study Go to School* report reveals that 2nd graders who participated in high-quality child care displayed better math skills, better cognitive and social skills, and better relationships with peers than classmates who did not participate in such programs.¹² Similar results have been shown in studies of several state prekindergarten programs. Again, participating children demonstrate higher math and reading scores, stronger learning skills, increased creativity, better school attendance, improved health and greater involvement by parents in elementary school.

As Susan Ochshorn from the Child Care Action Campaign asserts in her 2000 study, *Partnering for Success*, "until a vision of American education reform that includes early childhood is widely shared, the goal of universal school readiness will remain elusive."¹³



THE LANGUAGE, LOGIC & VALUES OF EARLY CARE & EDUCATION

The field of early childhood care and education is fraught with controversial and potentially divisive issues – some involving language and some involving values. Is it better for children to be in child care, at preschool or at home? Isn't preschool focused exclusively on education, while child care is more like babysitting? Do child care centers provide more structure for children than do family homes? Is Head Start different from prekindergarten? Does the prevalence of early childhood programs undermine the family by encouraging women to work? What roles should the federal, state and local governments play in supporting early learning? What should be the private sector's role?

The following section is designed to help policymakers sort through the conflicting semantics and values that surround the public debate about the care and education of young children.

DEFINING THE TERMS

8

When considering where children learn and grow during their youngest years, birth to age 5, there is no formal, common language. A variety of terms are used by parents, policymakers and the media: child care, day care, preschool, prekindergarten, Head Start, nursery school, early care and education. Are these the same? The answer is no – and yes.

For many people, there are distinct differences between the terms.¹⁴ For example, “preschool” and “prekindergarten” tend to be the responsibility of state education authorities and are usually open either half-day or during school hours. Preschools generally are understood to provide education services and to serve children who are 3, 4 and 5 years old. In contrast, “child care” tends to be under the auspices of health and/or social welfare agencies or run on a private basis. Child care generally is understood to provide custodial care for children (infants, toddlers and preschool-age children) of working parents and to be open year-round on an extended-day basis (at least from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m.). “Family child care” is a term used to describe care purchased by families and provided in the caregiver’s home. “Day care” – although commonly used – is an inappropriate and unsuitable term for referring to the care and education of young children. “Days” are not cared for; children are.

When discussing the developmental and experiential needs of young children, there should be no distinction between these terms. Each program should provide a high-quality environment that is safe for children; each should have warm, nurturing, well-trained providers; and each should provide care and early education to all children.

Type of Care or Program

Common Definition

Care/Program Impact on Children

<p>Kith and Kin Care</p>	<p>Commonly understood to mean home-based care provided by an individual related or close to the child.</p>	<p>When any of these settings is of high quality, children spend time with a warm and nurturing caregiver who understands child development and the varying needs of individual children. Interesting and stimulating materials and activities surround children. Children are safe, feel secure and thrive in an environment that encourages their physical, social, emotional and cognitive development.</p> <p>When any of these settings is of low quality, children are deprived of the rich environment necessary to allow them to reach their full potential.</p>
<p>Child Care</p>	<p>Traditionally understood to be services provided for children of working parents, usually administered by state health and/or social welfare agencies or run on a private (commercial and nonprofit) basis. Centers are usually open year-round and for extended hours (at least 7 a.m. to 6 p.m.). Child care centers may include groups for infants (birth to 1 year), toddlers (1 and 2 years of age) and preschool-age children (3- to 5-year-olds).</p> <p>These full-day centers also may be called child development centers, early learning centers or carry the name of a specific sponsor.</p>	
<p>Family Child Care</p>	<p>Commonly understood to mean home-based care, not in the child's own home, purchased by the child's family and provided by an individual not related to the child. Care may be provided for children from one or several families.</p>	
<p>Preschool</p>	<p>Traditionally understood to include the provision of early education to 3-, 4- and 5-year-old children who are not old enough for kindergarten. Programs usually are administered by state education authorities and are open either half-day or during school hours (9 a.m. to 3 p.m.).</p> <p>This term also is used generically to refer to services for preschool-age children (4- and 5-year-olds).</p> <p>Preschool tends to include prekindergartens and nursery schools.</p>	
<p>Head Start and Early Head Start</p>	<p>Head Start and Early Head Start are comprehensive child development programs serving children from birth to age 5, pregnant women and their families. They are child-focused programs and have the overall goal of increasing the school readiness of young children in low-income families. Programs are administered and funded by the federal government and traditionally operate part-day during the school year.</p>	

FACING THE QUESTIONS

Beyond the discrepancies and confusion of language, policymakers often are confronted with tough questions that evoke debate and disagreement. What follows are some of the thorny questions that frequently emerge when policymakers broach the issue of early care and education.

Should mothers stay home?

This is a reasonable question for every individual family to consider thoughtfully. It is not a question that can be universally answered by state policy.

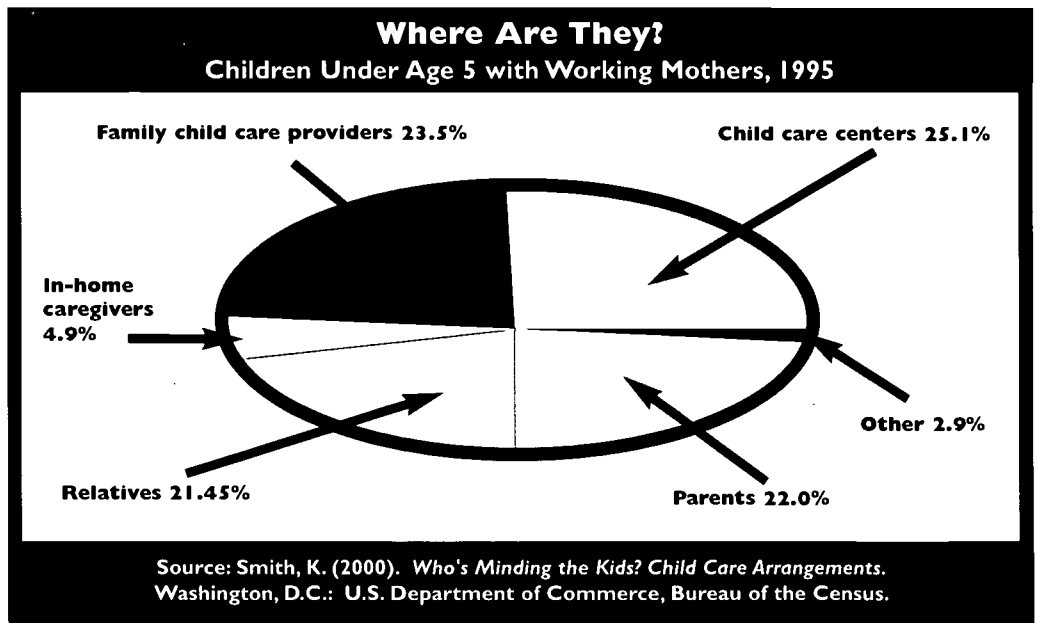
Most Americans feel that raising children is, first and foremost, a parental role and responsibility. The reasons that individual mothers decide to go to work – or stay in the labor force after a birth – vary from one family to another. As previously noted, millions of women are not staying home – even during their child’s first year. This trend is attributable to several factors: escalation in living costs, unprecedented increases in the number of available jobs, successful legal efforts to expand women’s access to the workplace and the mechanization of many household tasks.

Policymakers shouldn’t get bogged down in the debate of whether women should work outside the home. Regardless of the reasons, more and more parents are employed outside of the home, and more and more children need some form of nonparental care. These changes are unlikely to be temporary shifts in social and economic patterns. The facts reflect millions of personal, family decisions. Employed parents, and young children needing high-quality early care and education options, are a fact of life in today’s world.

Rima Shore, author of *Rethinking the Brain: New Insights into Early Development*, sums it up: “Research shows that deep-seated guilt and anxiety about balancing work and family can harm not only mothers, but also children. When mothers believe that they are doing the wrong thing, either by working or by staying at home, children may be adversely affected. Ultimately, what is best for families is to have real choices, and that requires policies and societal attitudes that support parents whether or not they work outside the home.”¹⁵

Rather than trying to achieve consensus on whether or not mothers should stay home with young children, policymakers should work toward developing and implementing policies and norms that support parents and nurture children.

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Who decides what is best for children?

Parents always will be their children's first and most important teachers, caregivers and decisionmakers. Policymakers and government cannot decide what is best for every family. Rather, government's role is to help facilitate the development of a variety of sound options from which families can choose.

Researchers in the social sciences and the medical field have pointed to a handful of key ingredients that children need to grow up happy and healthy. Leading child development expert and pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton and renowned child psychiatrist Stanley I. Greenspan have defined six "irreducible needs" of infants and young children. All children need, they say:

- Ongoing nurturing relationships**
- Physical protection, safety and regulation**
- Experiences tailored to individual differences**
- Developmentally appropriate experiences**
- Limit-setting, structure and expectations**
- Stable, supportive communities.**¹⁶

For children to grow, learn and become productive citizens, these needs must be met regardless of whether children are in the care of a parent, a relative, a neighbor or an early care and education provider.

The fundamental issues are (1) whether the adults present in the child's life offer nurturing, interaction and sensitivity to the child's cues that encourage social, emotional and cognitive development; and (2) whether the child's environment ensures safety, health and appropriate stimulation that encourage physical development. Quality, or the lack thereof, is not a given in any setting – not in child care centers, not in preschools, not in children's own homes.

One of the most comprehensive studies of child care quality¹⁷ reported that the vast majority of center-based care was not of high quality. Home-based programs are rated lower in quality than center-based programs, and unregulated programs are rated lower than regulated programs.¹⁸ In most cases, having a parent or family member stay home with young children is the preferred alternative. Still, there are some home environments that are not as nurturing as others – homes in which there is violence, drug or alcohol abuse, and other problems that prevent children from thriving.

Parents and families decide what is best by choosing the environment they feel will benefit their young children the most. But do parents always know how to recognize and provide a quality environment for young children? In a national survey conducted in 2000, only one-third of parents felt "very prepared" for parenthood.¹⁹ The current popularity of parenting magazines, videos and classes illustrates that many parents are searching for guidance and information on how to raise happy, confident, creative, intelligent and emotionally healthy children. In addition, if parents do know how to recognize a quality environment for young children, such environments are not always accessible or affordable.



To this end, in terms of deciding what is best for children, the most appropriate roles for policymakers to play are the following:

- **Ensuring that each and every family has good and accurate information about the importance and primary influence of the family**
- **Providing accurate information about the choices families have when seeking high-quality early care and education outside the home**
- **Maximizing the availability and accessibility of high-quality early care and education options in communities.**

Should resources be allocated for young children at the expense of older children?

With limited public resources and increasing attention being brought to the inadequacies of the K-12 education system, questions sometimes arise about the notion of withdrawing resources from older children – and other programs – to invest them in young children. The interest in and emphasis on children from birth to age 5 should never be a trade-off for interest in and emphasis on older children. Optimal development and learning for Americans of all ages must be a top national priority. A good start in life for the nation's youngest children should not be obtained at the expense of their older brothers and sisters.²⁰

Just as policymakers value K-12 education and higher education, so too should they value early education. While no state currently supports children's youngest years with the same investments and infrastructure that support systems for older children (K-12 education, child welfare and postsecondary education), many states are making significant – although still inadequate – investments in early care and education. The "What States Are Doing" section of this report provides more specific examples of small, but meaningful, solutions that have not compromised the integrity of state-funded programs for older children.

Some policymakers are beginning to consider options for radically redesigning the structure of American education to encompass a "P-16" model. "P-16" reflects the central vision of a coherent, flexible continuum of public education that stretches from preschool to grade 16, culminating in a baccalaureate degree. Such restructuring might involve, for example, shifting responsibility for what has traditionally been the junior and senior years of high school to postsecondary institutions while, at the same time, shifting responsibility for the early care and education of 3- and 4-year-olds to elementary schools. These concepts could well entail reallocating some of the funds currently spent on juniors and seniors to young children. For additional information on P-16, visit the Education Issues section of the ECS Web site at www.ecs.org.

Why do we need another "government solution"?

There is an oft-expressed suspicion that big government bureaucracies are being created to usurp parental rights or to undermine the economic viability of private early care and education programs. In reality, the vision outlined by many experts in the field does not include building new bureaucracies or relinquishing parental responsibilities. Rather, most visions of systems of early care and education are based fundamentally on a collaborative partnership among parents, the private sector and the public sector.

Universal early care and education does not mean that all children must be in programs administered by the public schools. In fact, nearly all federal and state early childhood programs allow money, training and other supports to go to home-based, center-based, community-based and school-based sites. For example, in Georgia, the only state with universal access to prekindergarten for 4-year-olds, more than half the programs are delivered in community-based programs typically considered to be child care centers and homes. The concept of a system of early care and education does not envision uniformity and conformity. Rather, it envisions reliable quality across all programs, enhanced parent education and engagement, consistent facility regulation and licensing, and appropriate roles for government, business and other community-based entities.²¹

The bottom line is that while government will never be the solution, it must be part of the solution.

WHAT STATES ARE DOING

Over the past decade, many states have invested energy, creativity, leadership, commitment and resources in early care and education. Still, no state has managed to put together all of the pieces of a high-quality, collaborative, affordable and accessible early care and education system.

Many researchers and advocates in the field are working on conceptualizing what the core components of a system of early care and education are, how they might be financed and how they might best be implemented. The generally agreed-upon components of an effective system of early care and education are as follows:²²

Dedication to quality programs that offer a wide range of proven approaches to meet the social, emotional, cognitive, language and developmental needs of young children

An established system of **professional development** that has explicit criteria for all adults working with young children, provides ongoing opportunities for meaningful training and education, and requires staff to be licensed

The **engagement of families** as partners in their children's early care and education

An **informed and supportive public** that understands the importance of the early years and invests accordingly

Full **funding** so that all families desiring early childhood services can access them at a rate commensurate with their ability to pay

Licensure for all early care and education programs that is streamlined and enforced

A permanent, legislatively mandated, **state-level governance structure** that is responsible for early care and education programs

An **accountability** component that focuses on goals and results for children and includes appropriate measures to assess the accomplishment of those goals

A commitment to a **seamless education system** focused on meeting the learning needs of children across the education spectrum, from preschool through postsecondary.

The one state that comes the closest to having all of these pieces in place is **North Carolina**. The establishment of Smart Start in 1993 marked the beginning of a comprehensive, pioneering approach to addressing the needs of young children from birth to age 5 by building a system of early care and education. North Carolina has built an infrastructure that supports community-based, high-quality early childhood services; is led by public-private partnerships; measures the success of its strategies; enhances teaching quality; involves parents as partners; and is included in the state's vision of – and investment in – education achievement.²³

Several other states have taken significant steps toward establishing a comprehensive system of early care and education, including **Alabama, California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, New Jersey** and **New York**.

This section provides brief examples of what states are doing to address the needs of young children and their families. While some of these efforts may appear to be "baby steps," with relatively small amounts of money attached or with limited impact, the policy implications in many cases are significant.



DEDICATION TO QUALITY

Developing and sustaining high-quality programs is a key to ensuring that children achieve strong positive outcomes and to guaranteeing that families feel confident about their children's safety, care and education.

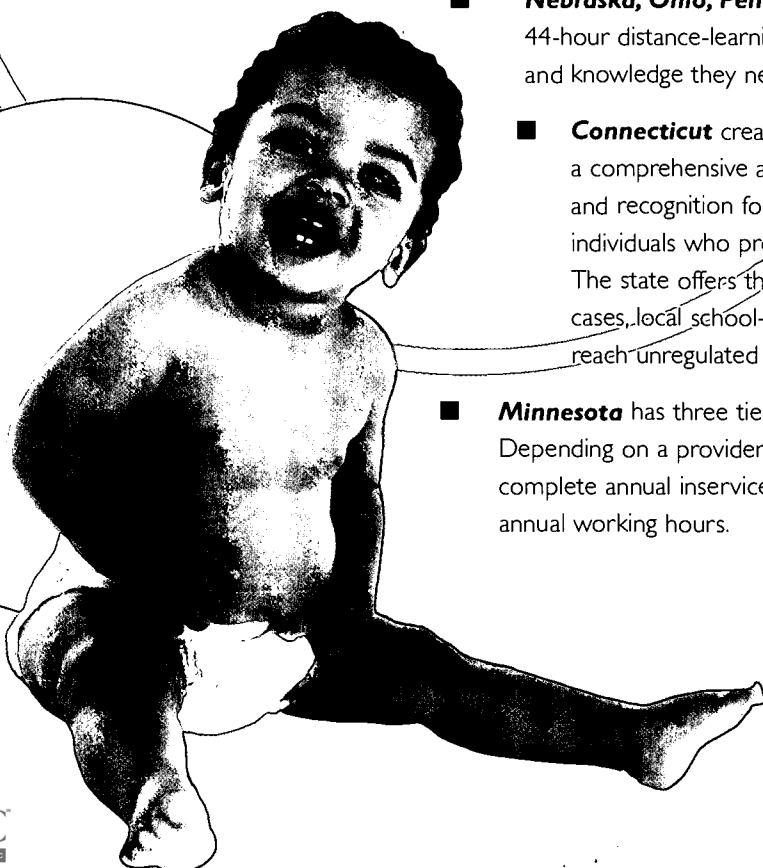
- **Illinois** has a statewide Quality Counts program that focuses on the importance of quality child care, helps parents identify issues to consider when selecting care and provides resources to assist practitioners in offering quality care and education.
- The **Kansas** Department of Education convened parents and representatives from state agencies, universities, churches and other organizations to develop Quality Standards for Early Childhood Programs. The state education and health departments have endorsed the quality standards and are implementing them in all of their sponsored programs. Parents as Teachers, Even Start, state university early childhood classes, and many private preschool care and education programs also use the standards.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Studies show that one of the most important factors in determining the quality of care is the interaction between a caregiver and a child. Caregivers who are trained in early care and education are more responsive to children's needs and better equipped to help children succeed. Thirteen states require teacher certification, although half of those states allow exceptions to provide greater flexibility. Some states are investing substantially in teacher education as a means to improve the quality of early learning programs.

- **Seventeen states** offer the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Project in some variation of the original North Carolina model. T.E.A.C.H. is a scholarship program that encourages early care and education providers to attain additional training and education. Early childhood teachers who accept a scholarship and complete the training have a large proportion of their education costs paid and are awarded additional compensation upon completion.
 - **Nebraska, Ohio, Pennsylvania** and **California** use HeadsUp! Reading, a 44-hour distance-learning program designed to equip providers with the skills and knowledge they need to improve children's literacy and readiness for school.
 - **Connecticut** created the Connecticut Charts a Course program, a comprehensive and coordinated system of career development and recognition for early care and education professionals, including individuals who provide licensed early care and education in all settings. The state offers the first 15 hours of training free of charge. In some cases, local school-readiness councils have enhanced the program to reach unregulated providers.
 - **Minnesota** has three tiers of training requirements in its staff licensing provisions. Depending on a provider's education background, he or she is required to complete annual inservice training equivalent to between 1% and 2% of their annual working hours.

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FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Understanding that families are children's first and most important advocates, the quality and effectiveness of programs for young children are contingent upon the degree to which families' needs are met and to the degree that families understand, demand and are engaged in high-quality early care and education. States' efforts to promote the engagement of families in their children's early care and education take a variety of forms and approaches. For example:

The **Minnesota** Early Childhood and Family Education Program provides parent education, home visits, early screening for health and developmental problems, and information on other community resources to all families with children below age 4.

Ohio has provided funding for the development of materials on encouraging business involvement, supporting employees' child care needs and serving children with special needs in child care.

Oregon initiated a public information campaign, Five Steps to Quality Child Care, to inform parents about the importance of quality child care.

PUBLIC SUPPORT

Public understanding and support are essential components in building and sustaining policy changes. A number of states, including **Washington, Illinois, New Hampshire, Maryland, Wisconsin, Ohio** and **Georgia**, are working in partnership with the National Governors' Association on statewide public-information campaigns. Many states have focused particular attention on the business community because of its resource base (both human and capital), its political power, and its interest in and support for education reform.

The **District of Columbia** held a forum on child care for Chamber of Commerce members and conducted a survey of businesses to determine their involvement in child care issues and responsiveness to their employees' needs.

Indiana established the Business Partnership Specialist Project, designed to encourage private-sector leadership on early care and education issues. A statewide network of specialists consults with corporations, educates the community on work/family issues and helps create stronger connections between community organizations and local employers.

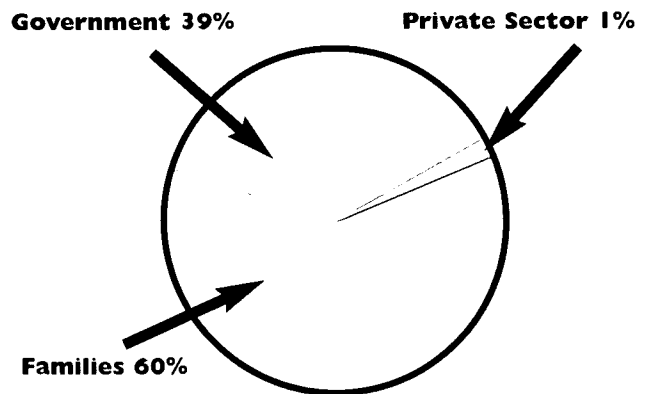
The **New Hampshire** Business Partners for Early Learning, an independent, nonprofit organization, promotes the stability of the child care workforce by developing programs to attract and retain talented employees; works to establish community-based partnerships among the child care community, businesses, parents, and school administrators to help businesses and communities meet their child care needs; and supports the development of family-friendly workplace policies so that parents are able to strike a healthy balance between work and family life.

FUNDING

While no state fully funds a system of early care and education, states are using a variety of innovative approaches and multiple funding streams to finance their efforts on behalf of young children. Many states now are faced with competing demands to control tight budgets and to improve services for children and families. Some states have come up with ways to generate new revenue to support early care and education, and others have developed new strategies for using existing resources.

- **Arkansas** recently enacted a new surcharge on beer that is earmarked for child care.
- **California** voters in 1998 approved Proposition 10 that imposed a 50-cent tax on cigarettes and other tobacco products. Funds generated by the tax, which are split between the state and counties, are used to promote, support and improve early childhood programs.
- **Colorado** established a child care contributions tax credit and a voluntary income tax checkoff to raise money to improve child care programs.
- **Connecticut** makes tax-exempt bonds available to help finance facilities for early childhood programs, and uses Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds to underwrite a portion of the debt.
- **Georgia** offers a universal prekindergarten program for all 4-year-olds in the state that is funded by state lottery proceeds, Child Care Development Block Grant funds and Head Start.
- **Maine, Kansas and Kentucky** have allocated some of their states' tobacco settlement funds to early care and education initiatives.
- In **New York City**, Local 1199 of the National Health and Human Services Employees Union, raises \$9 million each year for child care subsidies through collective bargaining agreements with employers.
- **Seattle, Minneapolis, Greater Kansas City, the Lakes Region of New Hampshire and Fairfax County, Virginia**, participate in the Finance CIRCLE, a national initiative that is testing the applicability of the higher education funding model to child care financing. Several key elements of higher education funding are being adapted for child care and piloted at the demonstration sites, including: a uniform method of calculating a family's ability to pay for early learning and after-school programs; financial aid for families to help fill the gap between what good programs cost and what families can afford; and links between financial aid/program funding and quality standards.

Major Revenue Sources for Child Care and Early Education



Source: Chart is based on data from Stoney, L., and Greenberg, M. (1996). "The Financing of Child Care: Current and Emerging Trends" in *The Future of Children*, vol. 6., no. 2.

LICENSURE

Strong licensing provisions are one of the foundations of an early care and education system. Consumers of any public service should know that the services being offered are regulated and monitored adequately. Yet, nationwide, roughly 40% of all early care and education programs are exempt from state regulations. Among the states that have made progress on this front are the following:

Connecticut convened a strategic planning initiative to connect “kith and kin” providers to the formal child care community.

North Carolina implemented a five-star rating system that features various rewards and incentives for providers who achieve higher-than-minimum standards. To assist with the increased monitoring responsibilities, the state has added 60 licensing consultant/supervisor positions. The state also is phasing in a program for licensing preschool programs in public schools.

Tennessee improved its staff-child ratios for infants and toddlers, changing them from 1:5 to 1:4 for infants and from 1:8 to 1:7 for toddlers. The state also increased its monitoring requirements: child care centers will receive six unannounced visits annually, and licensed family child care homes will receive four visits annually.

STATE-LEVEL GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

In recent years, more than 30 states have established governance bodies designed to give greater priority to children and family issues and to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of programs that serve children and families. This trend reflects the growing consensus that child and family services can be improved through better coordination and/or integration, as well as the political popularity of state and local councils devoted to children’s issues.²⁴

Alabama created state- and county-level Children’s Policy Councils, which work together to assess the needs of communities and make recommendations for changes in state policy involving early care and education.

Colorado has created the Early Childhood Leadership Team, whose members include representatives from the state departments of education, human services and public health; state and regional Head Start programs; and advocacy organizations. The team meets monthly to share information, coordinate their agencies’ efforts and disburse grants to local communities.

Ohio sponsors a state-level Head Start/child care working group charged with identifying and eliminating barriers to partnering across programs and funding streams.

The **Washington** Partnership links Head Start, prekindergarten and child care programs with state agencies implementing WorkFirst, Washington’s welfare-reform program. The partnership blends child care subsidies with Head Start and prekindergarten funding to provide full-day, full-year early care and education services. Partnership members meet on a regular basis to share updates about service delivery and to conduct cross-training to learn about the concerns and challenges of one another’s agencies.



ACCOUNTABILITY

There is growing interest among state policymakers in implementing results-based systems for children and families. Accountability strategies shift the focus of government's role in early care and education from simply expanding services to measuring the impact of those services. Measuring results over time promotes strategic planning and collaboration within government, as well as between government and communities.

- **North Carolina** is using \$750,000 of the Child Care and Development Block Grant to implement the state's first kindergarten readiness assessment. With no specific identifying information on the children, the data will help the state determine the degree to which children are prepared for school along various dimensions such as health and physical development, social and emotional development, approaches toward learning, language and communications development, and cognitive and general learning.
- **Oregon** has increased its ability to track child well-being with its Benchmarks Initiative. Based on a comprehensive list of social indicators, Oregon has produced new sources of data to meet its emerging needs and new ways to make the data more widely available. For example, the state participates in an online database that displays comparative maps of all 36 counties showing indicators related to early school readiness.

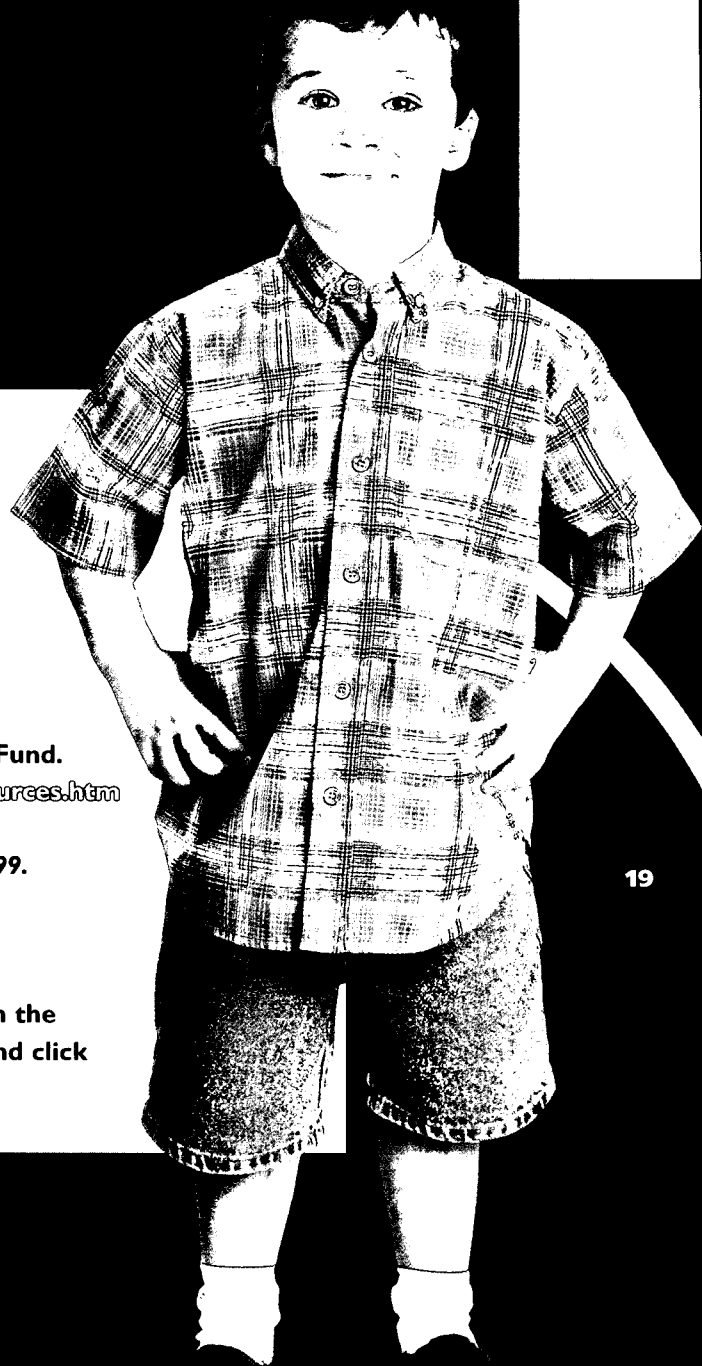
COMMITMENT TO A SEAMLESS LEARNING SYSTEM

A growing number of states are recognizing the interdependence and common goals of preschool, elementary, secondary and postsecondary education. As a result, some states are creating formal processes for infusing the different levels of public education with greater coherence and a stronger sense of connectedness. For some states, these integration efforts are termed "P-16" ("P" for preschool, and "16" for a four-year college degree).²⁵ For example:

- The **Kentucky** Early Literacy Initiative is aimed at ensuring that all children are able to score at the proficient level on state reading tests at the end of 4th grade. The initiative encourages early care and education programs to promote early literacy and provides professional development to help preschool and primary teachers master effective research-based reading strategies.
- The **Maryland** Model for School Readiness links curriculum, instruction and assessment from prekindergarten through 3rd grade. The model includes training for public school, child care and Head Start teachers on articulation of students' progress between preschool and public school and across grade levels.
- In **Illinois**, the P-16 Partnership for Educational Excellence brings together the governing bodies of the state's K-12 school system, community colleges and four-year colleges and universities. Among other things, the partnership has developed a comprehensive birth-to-8 approach to early childhood education that includes early literacy standards, program delivery standards and model sites, where both children and their parents can participate in quality education programs.

For Additional Information on What States Are Doing

- Map and Track: State Initiatives for Young Children and Families (2000)*. National Center for Children in Poverty. Available online under Publications at www.nccp.org
- State Developments in Child Care, Early Education and School-Age Care 2000 (2001, March)*. Children's Defense Fund. Available online at www.childrensdefense.org/head-resources.htm
- Seeds of Success, State PreKindergarten Initiatives 1998-1999*. Children's Defense Fund. Available online at cdfweb.wwh.net/publications/seeds_of_success.html
- Additional state programs and efforts are highlighted on the ECS Web site. Go to Education Issues at www.ecs.org and click on Early Childhood.



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A BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION

With a clearer understanding of the reasons why early care and education is important, a grasp of how to hold conflicting values in balance and a sampling of state initiatives, there are unmistakable possibilities for policymakers to take meaningful action on behalf of young children. Motivation, however, is just the beginning. What else is needed to move forward with policy agendas that benefit young children and their families?

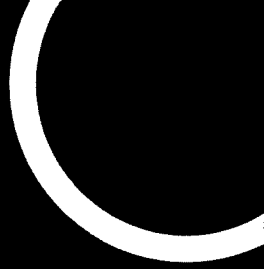
This section offers practical suggestions for state policymakers to develop, and to build upon, a blueprint for action. This blueprint can be used whether state leaders are in initial stages of thinking about early care and education or whether the state has a long history of programs and policies that support children. The strategies offered allow state leaders to begin "where they are," while also building the capacity and the momentum for an effective system of early care and education.

There is no single blueprint for action that suits the needs of all states or all communities. Some of the strategies outlined below will be more relevant in one state than another. There are, however, a few general guidelines for action planning and policy implementation that will apply to all states:

- **Be inclusive.** The more voices and interests that are included in the development of the vision and the plan, the more understanding and support will be generated for their implementation.
- **Be flexible.** Planning needs to be dynamic because circumstances will change over time.
- **Be realistic.** Recognize that meaningful change – especially systemic change – will not occur overnight. Designing and building systems takes time.
- **Be clear of the direction.** Identify the ultimate destination before selecting possible solutions.

The initial components of a blueprint for action – a vision, an understanding of what already exists, and concrete objectives and strategies – should be established by policymakers in partnership with other key stakeholders in the state: parents, early care and education providers, teachers, school administrators, health and social service providers, business and labor leaders, experts in early childhood development, media, faith communities, early childhood advocates and others.





DEVELOPING A VISION

In order to develop a clear direction for policies and activities, a vision of the desired future is necessary. The questions below are designed to help launch discussions that encourage creative input.

- What are the hopes for all children in the state?**
- Who are the children that should be affected?**
- What programs and policies for children will exist in the state’s vision of the future?**
- If there were no legal, political or financial constraints, what three actions would be taken to improve the quality of life for children in the state?**

DETERMINING YOUR PRESENT POSITION

Once the destination is determined, you need to know your present location in order to plot the best and most direct course to that destination. It is helpful to make a careful and critical assessment of the point from which your journey begins.

- What are the strengths and challenges in your state with respect to early care and education issues?**
- What policies and programs already exist, and how effectively are they working?**
- What funding streams exist at the federal, state and local levels?²⁶**
- What options do parents have when selecting early care and education programs? Where can this information be found?**
- Does the state offer incentives to assist providers in raising their program quality and in increasing their training and education?**

CREATING A COMPREHENSIVE ACTION PLAN

Armed with a vision and solid information, the next step is to develop objectives and strategies to help organize and direct your efforts. Objectives are measurable results; strategies are specific actions to be taken. Objectives provide the direction to go and how to know when you’ve arrived; strategies provide a path of activities to your vision. Strategies may change over time, adjusting to political, social and fiscal conditions. It is at this stage that inclusiveness and creativity are critical. The more people that are interested and engaged in the strategies, the more likely is success. Similarly, the more possible alternatives that are generated, the more likely is success.

- Will the strategies result in meaningful change? Will they meet the objectives?
- What are the risks?
- What is the level of community interest and engagement in the strategies?

• Political community	[] high	[] adequate	[] low
• Business community	[] high	[] adequate	[] low
• Education community	[] high	[] adequate	[] low
• Early childhood community	[] high	[] adequate	[] low
• Faith community	[] high	[] adequate	[] low
• "The public"	[] high	[] adequate	[] low

- Are these strategies likely to have resources dedicated to them?
 - Identify potential funders, including federal, state and private funding streams
 - Identify outside technical assistance that might be needed
- Estimate how long it will take to initiate and implement these changes. Can the strategies be implemented immediately (within six months)? Are they mid-range action items (to be initiated within 18 months)? Are they long-range action items (to be initiated within three years)?
- How will the strategies be evaluated? How will outcomes be reported?

KEEP THE AGENDA MOVING FORWARD

There are a number of specific strategies that policymakers can use in keeping a policy agenda for early care and education moving forward:

- **Know the facts - and use them.** Policy discussions about young children and their families can sometimes become bogged down in values debates. Initiating change by trying to address (or alter) societal values is not likely to meet with success. Rather, policymakers and advocates should initiate change by focusing on the facts. There are a number of credible organizations and government agencies that provide statistics on children's well-being.

Online Resources To Find the Facts

- 2001 The State of America's Children. www.childrensdefense.org
- Census Bureau Child Care Statistics. www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/children.html
- National Center for Children in Poverty Statistics. www.nccp.org
- KidsCount State Profiles of Child Well-Being. www.aecf.org/kidscount/kc2001/
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. <http://stats.bls.gov/>

For other resources, visit the ECS Web site at www.ecs.org.

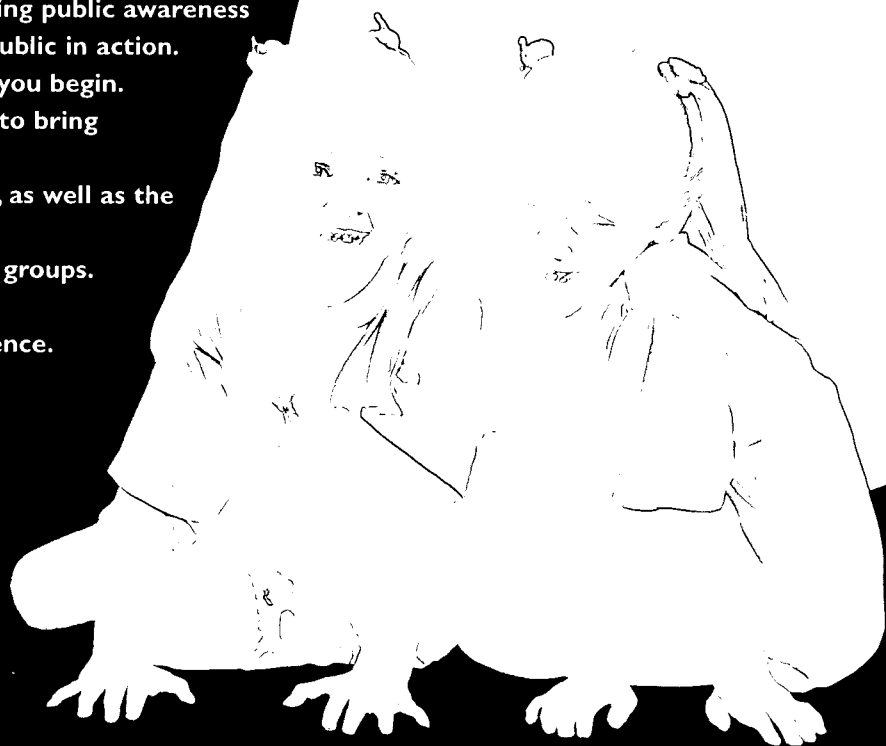
Create governance bodies that transcend individual state agencies. Cabinet-level governance bodies that bring together representatives from key state agencies provide opportunities to promote better coordination among government programs that serve young children and their families. These commissions, advisory groups, councils, boards and task forces provide critical leadership in envisioning, designing and building systems of early care and education. In addition, the members represent a repository of suggestions about policy innovations, stories about bureaucratic and legislative battles and advice regarding political strategy.²⁷

Encourage and support coordination at the local level. Local early care and education councils have emerged across the nation, making notable progress in integrating early childhood services, streamlining service delivery and increasing program efficiencies. Such councils provide a forum for groups of people who have a stake in the early care and education of children to convene, engage in collaborative discussion and actively support specific policy goals.

Know what the public thinks and build on it. A number of states and organizations are using pollsters to gauge public sentiment on policy options for young children. The research is beginning to discern whether or not – and under what conditions – the public is willing to support various policy proposals. For example, I Am Your Child, in partnership with two polling firms, recently hosted focus groups in four states. Among their findings were: (1) The public is more comfortable with the term “universally available, voluntary prekindergarten” than with “universal pre-K,” which sounds too much like a mandatory program; and (2) many people express a preference for government-assisted preschool and pre-K programs, rather than government-run programs.²⁸ Findings such as these are vital to crafting and delivering policy proposals that will resonate with and be embraced by the public.

Engage the public. As with most public policy, the best proposals and agendas will not move forward unless there are strategic, ongoing efforts to educate and engage the most important movers and shakers – the public. Public will can be either a motivator or an obstacle to moving policy agendas, depending on the context. The Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Families and Work Institute recently published a brief entitled *The Seven Lessons of Early Childhood Public Engagement*. This document describes recent early childhood public engagement efforts and outlines lessons for public engagement leaders. Briefly, their seven lessons are:²⁹

- See a campaign in stages – from changing public awareness to changing behavior to engaging the public in action.
- Know how people see the issue before you begin.
- Target the people who have the power to bring about change.
- Spell out the costs of not taking action, as well as the benefits of change.
- Create different messages for different groups.
- Timing is crucial.
- Unexpected messengers make a difference.



- **Think in terms of public-private partnerships.** Tapping the resources of the corporate sector is a way to bring fresh credibility, new perspectives and powerful voices to the policy table. When business leaders lobby on behalf of children, legislators tend to regard them as doing so not out of self-interest, a motive they often ascribe to child advocates. Rather, they view their concern as genuine and related to how the well-being of children might affect the community's future well-being and economic strength.³⁰

Resources on Public/Private Partnerships

- Financing Child Care in the United States.* <http://www.emkf.org/pdf/childcare2001.pdf>
- Head Start-Child Care Partnership Study.* www.quilt.org/pdfdocs/BushBooklet.pdf
- Business Leaders as Legislative Advocates for Children.* www.ffcd.org/blood.pdf
- Partnering for Success: Community Approaches to Early Learning.*
www.childcareaction.org/rpubs.html
- For additional information on partnerships and collaborations, visit ECS' Web site at www.ecs.org, click on "Education Issues," then "Early Childhood."

CONCLUSION

With intellectual, moral, financial and emotional motivation; persuasive language and logic; compelling examples of how other states and communities are tackling the issue; and appropriate planning and implementation tools, there is no reason why policymakers cannot begin to build high-quality systems of early care and education for the nation's youngest children. The central message of this report is that there is no time like the present to bring to life John Dewey's vision: "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children."

Let's not wait any longer to ensure that every child starts school and life ready to succeed. Let's meet the needs of our youngest children – starting early, starting now.



ENDNOTES

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- ⁵ Shore.
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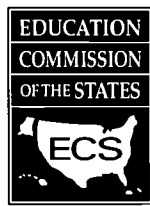
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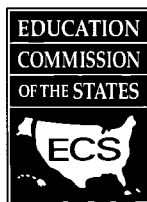
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