

A Plan to Expand Preschool in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

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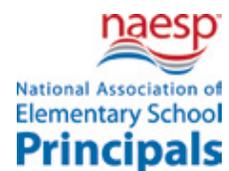
Center for American Progress



Today, more than half of children from low-income families start school behind without the foundational skills that set them up to learn and be successful in kindergarten and beyond. Knowing this, states and cities as diverse as Oklahoma, Georgia, New York City, Boston, San Antonio, and Washington, D.C., have taken steps to expand access to preschool. Research from these early-adopter states and districts shows that low-income children can gain an average of four months of additional learning. In the highest quality programs, they gain 6 to 12 months, significantly narrowing the school readiness gap.¹



For this reason, preschool is a popular policy across diverse and bipartisan stakeholders. Leaders in the business, military, and law enforcement have spoken in favor of further public investments in preschool. And Republican and Democratic governors have been outspoken proponents of expanding access to preschool.



While Congress considers changes to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or ESEA, it has an opportunity to make a big difference in the lives of low-income children by making high-quality preschool a reality for those who don't currently have access. The goal of ESEA is to ensure that all students, particularly disadvantaged students, have access to good education. Incorporating early learning in ESEA is critical to achieving this goal, as many of the poorest children do not have access to high-quality early childhood programs. Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) identified early childhood education as a key priority for ESEA reauthorization, and House Democrats led by Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA) included early childhood in their version of ESEA.



We propose a new title in ESEA—Strong Start for America's Children—that would authorize \$27 billion in mandatory funding that incentivizes states to expand preschool while also investing in high-quality child care for younger children and making full-day kindergarten more widely available. This proposal is described in more detail below.



Expanding access for the poorest children

Over the next five years, preschool funds would be phased in to expand access for children who will attend Title I concentration schools. Funds would be distributed to states based on the proportion of four-year-olds below 200 percent of the federal poverty level in the state. States would in turn allocate funds to school districts to serve children who will attend Title I concentration schools. New preschool funds would flow to the poorest schools in the country to provide early learning opportunities to their youngest students. States will also have flexibility to allocate funds to other schools and districts that are not necessarily Title I concentration schools but have large populations of poor children. Congress would need to work to find additional funding sources to make preschool universal, but this down payment would provide the poorest children with access to high-quality preschool in the meantime.

A federal-state partnership

States have led the way on preschool, with a handful of states serving most of their four-year-olds in public preschool. A federal effort should build on this success by investing federal funds to help states ramp up their programs. Under this proposal, states would share the cost with the federal government, matching 10 percent of the federal investment for the first two years and scaling up in subsequent years.

Use existing capacity to expand preschool

Preschool expansion should utilize a range of early education programs that meet the high-quality standards, including Head Start and child care. Using existing capacity to provide preschool in the community will allow for faster expansion and build quality across programs. States should ensure equitable distribution of preschool funds across schools and other early childhood program providers.

Coordination and collaboration between early childhood providers and schools

Preschool providers and districts must work directly with school principals to create a plan to ensure coordination of pre-K-3 services and alignment of standards. The plan should address transitions for children and families, including sharing student data, joint planning, and professional development for principals, teachers, and other staff across the pre-K-3 grade continuum. Preschool programs must also coordinate with other early childhood programs, including Head Start, IDEA Part C and Part B Section 619, child care assistance, home visiting, and other federal, state, and locally funded early education programs.

High-quality standards that yield results

Research shows that children can make big gains in preschool when programs are high quality. To ensure that taxpayer dollars are used effectively and efficiently, preschool funds should only be distributed to providers who can meet high-quality standards. To maximize taxpayers' investments and to ensure that children get the strongest start possible, programs receiving funds would need to meet these quality benchmarks:

- All teachers have at least a B.A. in early childhood education or a related field and specialized training or demonstrated competency in early childhood education. Paraprofessionals must have a Child Development Associate, or CDA, degree, an AA degree, or the equivalent.
- Instructional staff receives compensation and benefits that are comparable to K-12 teachers.
- The program provides a developmentally appropriate, research-based curriculum aligned with the state's early learning guidelines.
- It requires a maximum class size of 20 children with an adult-to-child ratio of 1:10.
- It includes monitoring and program evaluation for continuous improvement.
- The program provides developmental screenings, including screening for early literacy and math skill development and potential learning issues, nutritional information, and family engagement opportunities.
- It provides a full-day, full-school-year program.

Programs that include teachers who are enrolled in a B.A. program and on track to complete the degree within three years are eligible to receive funding. To help states build toward quality programs, they may reserve 20 percent of funds to improve quality in existing preschool programs for the first four years of the program. These amounts are not subject to a state match.

Expanding access for infants and toddlers

Equally important to preschool expansion is ensuring that infants and toddlers have access to high-quality early childhood programs. This new title would also include 15 percent of the federal and state matching funds to be set aside for high-quality care for infants and toddlers up to age three. Funds would support access to child care and other early education programs that meet high standards of quality for very young children.

State early learning and development standards

States must develop—or have already developed—standards that describe what children from birth to age five should know and be able to do. Standards should be developmentally, linguistically, and culturally appropriate. Standards must cover the following domains of development: physical, socio-emotional, approaches to learning, language and literacy, cognition and general knowledge, and mathematics and science.

Developing a highly qualified workforce

States should have a plan to support early childhood education staff to get bachelor's degrees or certifications that are required to continue to be a prekindergarten educator. This should include policies on leave, substitutes, and child care.

Full-day kindergarten

To ensure that gains in the preschool year are sustained in elementary school, it is important that children attend full-day preschool programs and then full-day kindergarten programs. Many states and school districts do not guarantee free full-day kindergarten. States that reach at least 50 percent of low-income four-year-olds in state preschool may use funds to expand full-day kindergarten in Title I concentration schools that do not currently have full-day kindergarten.

Ensuring funding for early childhood education

Congress could fund a preschool expansion—and pay for the first five years of the program—by making common-sense changes to the tax system.

Right now, corporations may deduct from their taxes money spent on merit-based pay for corporate executives in the form of stock options and half of their entertainment expenses. Eliminating both of these tax loopholes would net \$27 billion over the next 10 years, which could fund the first five years of an expanded preschool program.² In the past, both proposals have received support from Rep. David Camp, the former Republican Chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, and several Democrats.³

These revenue generators would result in more than 1.2 million new children attending early childhood programs—or 44 percent of the approximately 2.8 million four-year-olds currently slated to attend Title I schools with high concentrations of poverty.⁴ This approach certainly would not solve the school readiness gap completely, but it holds enormous promise to help more low-income children start life on an even playing field.

Endnotes

1 Hirokazu Yoshikawa and others, "Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education" (Society for Research in Child Development and Foundation for Child Development, 2013), available at http://www.srcd.org/sites/default/files/documents/washington/mb_2013_10_16_investing_in_children.pdf.

2 Based on authorization levels in the Strong Start for America's Children Act.

3 For more information, see Harry Stein, Alexandra Thornton, and John Craig, "The Growing Consensus to Improve Our Tax Code" (Washington: Center for American Progress), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/tax-reform/report/2014/09/23/97586/the-growing-consensus-to-improve-our-tax-code/>.

4 Based on estimates conducted by the Center for American Progress.