

## **FRAMING THE FUTURE: Addressing Pre-K in ESEA**

May 2011

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) offers a unique opportunity to update our nation's primary federal education law to take full advantage of the power of high quality pre-kindergarten education. Since 2001 when Congress last reauthorized ESEA, there has been an explosion of new evidence on the benefits of high quality early childhood programs, and a host of new early learning leadership efforts across states, in communities and around the globe. For example, over the last decade, the enrollment in state-funded pre-kindergarten programs has grown more than 70%.<sup>1</sup> Today, forty states and the District of Columbia provide some form of publicly funded pre-k and collectively spend \$5.4 billion on these programs.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, states and school districts have been working to coordinate the efforts of pre-k, child care, Head Start, and other early childhood programs to build a high quality continuum of early learning, that is aligned with kindergarten and primary grade education.

This brief describes the expanded context of early learning that exists today, how it connects with and bolsters education reform, and why it is important for federal legislation to address pre-kindergarten. Together, teachers, principals, superintendents, local and state school boards and chief state school officers call on Congress to reauthorize ESEA with a strong early education component, in recognition of the powerful contribution this effort will make to providing equal opportunity and enhanced outcomes for all children.

### **A New Paradigm**

Participation in an educational program prior to Kindergarten is no longer viewed as a privilege, but rather a vital component to educational success. Today, two-thirds of all children are enrolled in a center-based early care and education program the year before entering Kindergarten; forty percent of 4-year olds participate in publicly funded programs.<sup>34</sup> States have made a strong commitment to invest in early education even amid recent financial challenges. Some have incorporated early childhood programs into the core funding formula for public education or mobilized significant private and philanthropic investments. Others use gaming revenues and/or local property taxes to support programs.

However, despite the tremendous growth, recent fiscal conditions threaten to derail some of the progress made in states.<sup>5</sup> In addition, pre-k programs still vary

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widely in quality, content, and amount of funding. Many children do not have access to high quality care in their communities. Due to fiscal constraints some states are unable to offer publicly funded pre-k or are only able to provide services to specific populations of students (low-income, children with disabilities, English language learners), while others such as Oklahoma and Georgia have adopted a universal approach.

In fact, compared to other developed countries, U.S. enrollment in early education is relatively low. For example, Belgium, France, and Italy enroll 95 percent of children ages 3 to 6 in universal, public preschool programs. Other countries such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, Hungary, Japan, Germany, Spain, and Russia all have higher percentages of 4-year-olds enrolled in school than the United States does.<sup>6</sup> The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates that the United States spends 0.4% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on pre-primary education—an amount below many of our biggest competitors.<sup>7</sup>

We agree that a high quality early education is essential to ensure that children develop the cognitive, social and emotional skills they need to be successful in school. The evidence is clear on the benefits of this policy for children, public education and tax-payers.

### **The Power of Pre-K**

Overwhelming evidence on the benefits of high-quality early education programs has led educators to embrace pre-kindergarten as an essential part in children's continuum of early learning. There is no doubt that a high quality pre-k education can make a critical difference in a child's achievement. According to the National Commission on Behavior and Social Sciences and Education, "children who attend well-planned, high-quality early childhood programs in which curriculum aims are specified and integrated across domains tend to learn more and are better prepared to master the complex demands of formal schooling."<sup>8</sup>

Data from the national Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Kindergarten Cohort show that students who attended a pre-school or child care program scored higher on reading and math tests than children receiving parental care alone.<sup>9</sup> Multiple state studies have also documented significant cognitive gains for children who attend pre-k.<sup>10</sup>

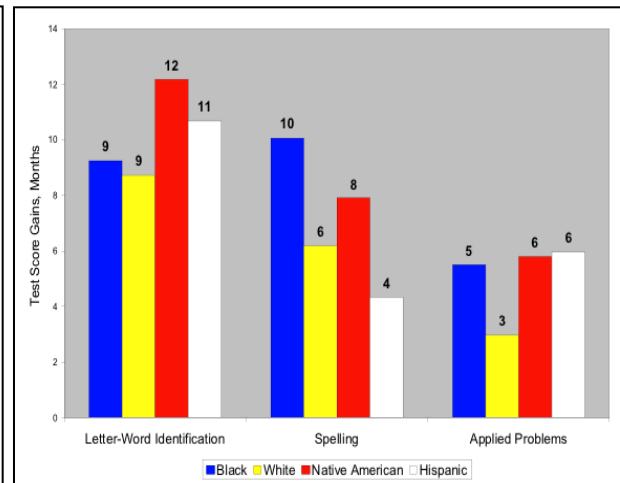
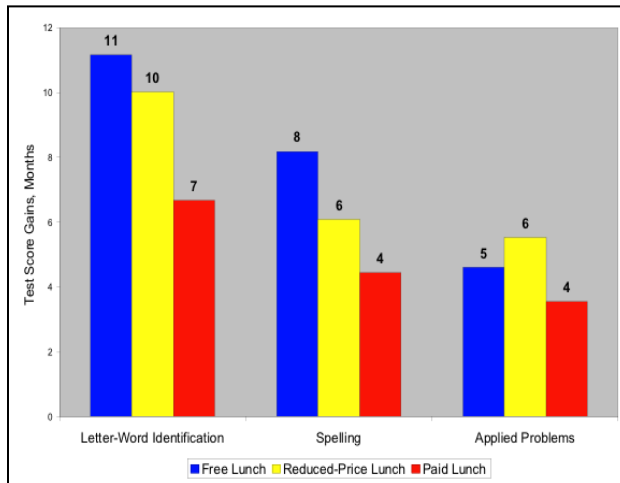
The benefits of pre-k are particularly powerful among children from low-income and minority families who on average start Kindergarten 12 to 14 months behind their peers in pre-reading and language skills.<sup>11</sup> High quality pre-k can help to mitigate these achievement gaps that are present before children begin school

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and that tend to worsen over time. The power of pre-k, however, extends to children of all income and racial groups (Charts 1 and 2).<sup>12</sup>

**Charts 1 & 2.** Effects of Tulsa Pre-K by Free Lunch Status and Race/Ethnicity<sup>13</sup>



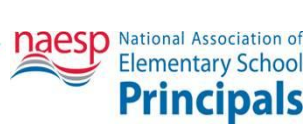
If aligned with learning standards and teaching practices in the early elementary school years, pre-k can be instrumental in helping to meet student performance targets by third grade. A longitudinal study of children in New Jersey found that those who attended public pre-k did significantly better in math, comprehension, and vocabulary skills by the end of second grade than those who did not attend these programs. In addition, gains were nearly double for those who attended two years of pre-k as opposed to one.<sup>14</sup>

Pre-k produces other long-term benefits such as reduced placement in special education, lower grade retention and higher graduation rates. These outcomes make not only a difference in students' success in school; they also have an economic impact on schools and communities across the country. As James Heckman, a Nobel Laureate in economics, points out the economic return on preschool intervention is much higher than the return on later education and social interventions. Studies have estimated that high quality programs produce anywhere from \$3 to as much as \$17 in social benefits for every dollar invested.<sup>15</sup>

### Role of Public Schools

Public schools have become central to the world of early education--whether they serve as the administrative agent for a pre-k program, provide space for a program, or partner with local preschool providers. Data show that two-thirds of

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all children in publicly funded pre-k are in public school settings.<sup>16</sup> Schools also represent 16% of Head Start and Early Head Start grantees.<sup>17</sup>

The increasing involvement of schools in early childhood helps not only prepare children for learning but also lays the foundation for broader reform. In recent years, more districts have begun incorporating pre-k as a school improvement strategy. Education leaders know that in addition to addressing the urgent needs of children in the K-12 system, early intervention is a wise investment that will pay off in future. For example, multiple state applicants in the Race to the Top federal education reform grant competition highlighted early education policies and practices to help improve their education systems. These included the development of early learning standards, increasing enrollment, alignment with K-12, incorporation of early childhood data in longitudinal data systems, as well as a host of other strategies.<sup>18</sup>

### Federal Action

Given what is known about the potential of the early years and the education challenges we face, it is important for federal policy to place more emphasis on pre-kindergarten education.

School districts currently use federal funds from various grant programs (including Title I of ESEA) to fund pre-k programs.<sup>19</sup> However, while current law allows LEAs to use Title I funds for a host of services including “early education,” evidence suggests that local leaders may be reluctant to do so given the mandated “set-asides” for transportation, supplemental services, and other requirements imposed during the last reauthorization of ESEA.<sup>20</sup>

As we look to update the nation’s federal education law, policymakers must recognize that the education landscape has changed. High quality early childhood education is a powerful tool for improving our education system. This means reframing ESEA to expand policies and practices to include younger children and early education interventions, including pre-k. Potential areas for reform include changes to access, program quality, alignment, workforce preparation, and data collection.

Possible areas for policy changes in ESEA regarding pre-k include:

- Access
- Program quality
- P-3 Alignment
- Data collection, and
- Workforce preparation

State and local school boards, superintendents, principals, and teachers believe that the federal government can help ensure children have a successful start in school. Policy changes can have a tremendous impact on children’s futures as

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well as the future success of our country.

### **Conclusion**

Providing children with a high quality early education takes the collective commitment of multiple parties including school districts, communities, parents, state education agencies and the federal government. The stakes now are higher than ever. Yet, our current system of early education is disjointed and federal investment is weak. While states and school districts have made tremendous progress in this area over the past few years, our nation still is a long way from matching the efforts of many of our global competitors. Reauthorization of ESEA provides the opportunity for the federal government to lay a firm foundation for early childhood education and recognize the new paradigm of education that exists today.

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<sup>1</sup> Enrollment has increased from 700,000 in 2001-2002 to 1.29 million in 2009-2010. National Institute for Early Education Research, *The State of Preschool Yearbook: 2003 & 2010*.

<sup>2</sup> Barnett, W. S., et. al., *The State of Preschool Yearbook, 2010*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, National Institute for Early Education Research.

<sup>3</sup> Kristin Denton Flanagan and Cameron McPhee, "The Children Born in 2001 at Kindergarten Entry: First Findings from the Kindergarten Data Collections of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B)," National Center for Education Statistics, October 2009, at <http://www.nces.ed.gov/pubSearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2010005> (February 5, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Barnett, W. S., et. al., *The State of Preschool Yearbook, 2009*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, National Institute for Early Education Research.

<sup>5</sup> Barnett, W. S., et. al., *The State of Preschool Yearbook, 2010*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, National Institute for Early Education Research.

<sup>6</sup> Education at a Glance 2010: OECD Indicators (2010). Table C1.1. Enrollment rates, by age (2008).

<sup>7</sup> Education at a Glance 2010: OECD Indicators (2010). Table B2.2. Expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP by level of education (2007).

<sup>8</sup> National Research Council (2001) *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*. Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy. Barbara T. Bowman, M.Suzanne Donovan, and M.Susan Burns, editors. Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

<sup>9</sup> Magnuson, K., Meyers, M., Ruhm, C., and Waldfogel, J. (2003). *Inequality in Preschool Education and School Readiness*. New York: Columbia University, School of Social Work.

<sup>10</sup> W. Steven Barnett, Cynthia Lamy, and Kwanghee Jung, "The Effects of State Prekindergarten Program on Young Children's School Readiness in Five States" (Rutgers University, National Institute for Early Education Research, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000) *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development. Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds. Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

<sup>12</sup> William Gormley, Jr., Deborah Phillips, and Ted Gayer, "Preschool Programs Can Boost School Readiness," *Science* 320 (June 27, 2008), pp.1723-24.

<sup>13</sup> Professor William Gormley, Georgetown Public Policy Institute, Presentation to National School Boards Association, September 8, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Frede, Ellen, Jung Kwanghee, W. Steven Barnett, and Alexandra Figueras. "The APPLES Blossom: Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study (APPLES) Preliminary Results through 2nd Grade Interim Report." New Brunswick: National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Heckman, J. J., & Masterov, D. V. (2007). "The productivity argument for investing in young children." *Review of Agricultural Economics*, 29, 446-493.

<sup>16</sup> Barnett, W. S., et. al., *The State of Preschool Yearbook, 2009*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, National Institute for Early Education Research.

<sup>17</sup> U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2008 - 2009 *Head Start Program Information Report (PIR) Profile Report - National Level*.

<sup>18</sup> Gayl, Chrisanne L., *Pre-k & the Race to the Top: A review of early education proposals in states' Phase 1 grant applications*, April 2010, Washington DC: Pre-K Now.

<sup>19</sup> A range of federal programs including, Title I A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Child Care Development Block Grant, Head Start+ and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act may be used to enhance and expand pre-k programs.

<sup>20</sup> Committee for Education Funding, *Budget Response: Fiscal Year 2009* (Washington, DC: Committee for Education Funding, 2008): 2.

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