



# A Quiet Crisis:

## The Urgent Need to Build Early Childhood Systems And Quality Programs for Children Birth to Age Five

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A Policy Statement of the Council of Chief State School Officers

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Adopted November 2009

## **THE COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS**

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a nonpartisan, nationwide, nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, and five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions.

CCSSO provides leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance on major education issues.

The Council seeks member consensus on key educational issues and expresses their view to civic and professional organizations, federal agencies, Congress, and the public.

### **CCSSO's Early Childhood Task Force**

The CCSSO Early Childhood Task Force serves as a focal point for Council leadership to enhance the healthy development, learning progress, and school success of all young children. In particular, it works to eliminate disparities in learning opportunities and outcomes for at-risk children, birth to age five, by expanding high-quality early education programs and family engagement efforts. It also supports state efforts to align and connect early childhood and K–12 education standards, programs, data, and professional development efforts to form a more cohesive and powerful 21st-century education system.

The task force is led by Chair Sandy Garrett, Oklahoma Superintendent of Public Instruction, and Vice Chair Susan Gendron, Commissioner of Education in Maine, and includes the chief state school officers from the states of Colorado, Illinois, Louisiana, New Hampshire, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin. Tom Schultz served as staff for the task force and consultant Deborah Roderick Stark wrote the policy statement.

### **Acknowledgements**

The Council extends its gratitude to the Birth to Five Policy Alliance and the Boeing Company for their generous support of the Early Childhood Task Force.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A quiet crisis is threatening the future of America. Deeply rooted achievement gaps and shortfalls, and a lack of high-quality early learning opportunities compromise the potential of too many children. America vows to be the country of hope and opportunity for all, but it fails to fulfill this promise to our youngest citizens. We celebrate their birth, but then wait to see if they succeed in school before we pay attention to their strengths and needs. Unlike many other countries, we fail to make the most of the opportunities to foster children's lifelong motivation and engagement in learning through exploration, discovery, and discussion in the early learning years.

Research and practice confirm that we are at a point of crisis—and opportunity. New studies tell us that achievement disparities between disadvantaged children and their peers can be documented as early as nine months of age. Research also tells us how to design high-quality early childhood programs to

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enable all children to build a solid foundation for school success and lifelong learning. For years we have known that kindergarten is too late to begin efforts to equalize education opportunity. Now the evidence is indisputable: we can save money, reduce school failure, and enhance children's lifelong success and productivity by improving learning opportunities for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

Chiefs know that building a 21<sup>st</sup>-century learning system begins with a strong foundation of early childhood programs for all children. Equally important is the need to provide earlier, more sustained, intensive, enriched, and

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carefully sequenced early learning experiences to children who are most at risk, to overcome the odds that are stacked against them.

Chiefs are invigorated by the recent efforts to expand investment in the early years. We embrace the opportunity to be part of the solution by adopting an agenda that focuses on

- Building coherent, integrated state early childhood systems instead of a collection of categorical programs;
- Defining policies and advocating for funding to provide the highest of quality in all early childhood classrooms and settings;
- Aligning the early childhood system with K–3 schooling and beyond;
- Crafting a new state-federal fiscal and policy partnership to advance high-quality early childhood learning opportunities for all children, with a concentration on those most at risk.

If we are to be serious about eliminating our domestic and international achievement gaps, it is imperative that we expand our education reform agenda to enrich and uplift the learning potential of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Failure to do so will compromise the lifetime potential of millions of children each year—an injustice that we can no longer tolerate.

## SOUNDING THE ALARM

This year, more than four million children will be born in America—the kindergarten class of 2016. While families will delight in their babies, counting fingers and toes and dreaming of endless opportunity, education leaders across the nation are called to craft a partnership among early learning programs, families, and schools to enable every child to reach their full potential. It is not a simple task.

Many of these babies will start out with the odds stacked against them:

- About 11 percent will be born to a mother who received inadequate prenatal care.
- About 8 percent will be born at low birth weight.
- Almost 40 percent will be born to unmarried women, about 23 percent of these to teenagers.
- About 30 percent will be born to immigrant families, many who live in linguistically isolated households.
- Nearly 17 percent will not have a sufficient supply of nutritionally adequate and safe foods at some point in their first six years of life.
- More than 40 percent will live in families with income below twice the poverty level at some point in their first six years of life.

We know too well that poor health and economic insecurity are early warning signs of a compromised future. Complex life situations threaten children’s cognitive, social, emotional, and linguistic development and relegate them to the adverse side of the achievement gap. While some will break through these multiple challenges, many will not and inequity will prevail.

## Two Achievement Gaps

Our nation confronts two achievement gaps. The first is domestic, the second international. Both put our children and our economic future

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at risk. Taken together, they demand full-scale and full-bore education reform that begins in the early childhood years. If we fail to fully include the early years in reform, we will miss tremendous opportunities to tackle the root causes of inequity and underachievement.

### *The Domestic Achievement Gap*

As early as nine months of age, an achievement gap is evident among children from at-risk backgrounds and their more advantaged peers. Disparities across cognitive, social, behavioral, and health outcomes emerge in infancy and widen in toddlerhood. By the time children from low-income families enter kindergarten they are typically 12–14 months below national norms in language and pre-reading skills. These gaps persist and are linked to challenges later in life, including dropping out of school, teen pregnancy, and unemployment.

These facts should awaken educators and all Americans to the need to provide quality early learning opportunities while the foundation for future learning is being set. To eliminate the domestic achievement gap, we need to make sure that children have access to high-quality, comprehensive early learning opportunities, that those opportunities are evidence based and developmentally appropriate, and that families are fully engaged in guiding and supporting their children’s development.

## The International Achievement Gap

Even typical children in America—those who start out with a strong foundation and exhibit academic promise—fail to compete with their international peers. In 2006, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Program for International Student Assessment ranked U.S. students 21st among 30 countries in science, and 25th out of 30 in mathematics. Importantly, the assessment does not merely test whether students can reproduce what they have learned, but also how well they can extrapolate and apply their knowledge.

The international achievement gap does not bode well for the future economic vitality of America. Technology has flattened the world such that jobs can be digitized, automated, and outsourced to the most effective individuals around the world. If America continues to fall behind in educating another generation of children, our ability to compete in a global marketplace and to lead the world with innovation will be radically diminished.

This does not have to be. American students should not be near the bottom of the heap. If we analyze the countries at the top of the list, and those who have made the most progress, it is evident that top performing countries have universal high standards, focus on outcomes, and use data and best practices to ensure equity. Moreover, they provide a system of early childhood services to remedy preventable barriers to school success and build children's positive and inquisitive dispositions towards learning. We can and must learn from their example.

## The Early Learning Opportunity Gap

The potential of our youngest children is also threatened by an early learning opportunity

gap. As a nation, we devote fewer resources to supporting programs for infants and toddlers than we do for children of preschool age, and

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less overall per child for birth-to-five programs than for kindergarten to grade 12. The result is an opportunity gap in both access and quality.

Despite efforts to expand early learning opportunities, when taken as a whole, the patchwork of programs available for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers fails to meet demand. Simply put, there is insufficient funding—federal, state, and private—to ensure equitable access to early learning programs such as child care, home visiting, Early Head Start, Head Start, and pre-K. For example, historically, only 3 percent of children eligible for Early Head Start receive services, and only about half of the children eligible for the preschool Head Start program are able to enroll.

Beyond access are issues of quality. We fail to maximize the opportunities to enrich and accelerate early learning when program quality is variable or poor. A study by the National Institute for Child Health and Development found that only 10 percent of centers providing infant care met recommended standards and that there are linear associations between the number of standards met and child outcomes. Further, 60 percent of care for children from birth to age three was found to fall somewhat or very far short of research-based quality practices.

What is most alarming is that the early learning opportunity gap is most prevalent for children with multiple risk factors. At-risk children are disproportionately in poor-quality care, yet these

are the very children who would benefit the most from quality early learning programs. So at the very time that our infants, toddlers, and preschoolers should be building the mental scaffolding that supports higher levels of learning, they are being exposed to poor and mediocre care that will threaten the strength of that structure. And inequitable access to quality does not stop once they reach kindergarten. These same children are more likely to be in our lowest performing elementary schools and experience multiple years of poor-quality learning environments, thus reinforcing rather than overcoming achievement disparities and shortfalls.

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Chiefs across the nation are confronted with these most serious challenges—how to eradicate deeply rooted domestic and international achievement gaps. They grapple with this quandary each day as they work to ensure that every student completes high school with the skills needed to succeed in employment or higher education. They now recognize that the seeds of inequity are sowed early in children's lives, and thus their leadership of education reform must expand to encompass early childhood interventions.

It is time that America awakens to our failure to provide quality early learning opportunities for our youngest children and the resulting effect on their development. This quiet crisis is limiting the potential of our children, overwhelming our schools, and sending our economy into a tailspin with fewer and fewer workers able to compete in the global economy. As the chiefs of our

nation's public school systems, we must do our part to sound the alarm and focus our attention on beginning systemic education reform and investments in the early learning years.

## **SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY TO RESHAPE PUBLIC POLICY**

The good news is that we have arrived at an inflection point in policy toward young children and their families. We have a unique opportunity to build a more unified and powerful system of early childhood services, based on recent progress in research, in the examples of pioneering states, and in a new era of federal leadership.

### *A Solid Research Base*

A solid and growing base of research is available to inform chiefs as they reshape education reform to encompass early childhood investments and system building. From neuroscientists who understand the characteristics of healthy early brain development and the devastating harm of toxic stress on the brain, to economists who are able to document the savings to society of effective early interventions, we know more now than ever before about the importance of the early years.

We know that all children benefit from early learning opportunities that are developmentally appropriate and instill a sense of excitement and joy for exploration and discovery. Responsive, reciprocal, respectful relationships with caring adults who have a deep understanding of the unique stages of child development and effective strategies for stimulating active learning are critical. Infants and toddlers thrive in environments where they



have a strong bond with a consistent, responsive caregiver, where their cues are understood and their individual needs are respectfully attended to. Preschoolers similarly benefit from interactions with teachers that are socially positive and instructionally rich. Respectful relationships are essential to building the social and emotional competence of preschool children and readying them for formal schooling, as is engagement in content-

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rich learning that challenges, scaffolds, and extends skills and builds core dispositions and knowledge that will provide a strong foundation for future learning.

Research also tells us that quality makes a difference. Quality early childhood classroom environments are associated with enhanced child outcomes in the areas of language, vocabulary, early math, and social skills.

Research tells us that earlier is better, especially for those with multiple risk factors. Research tells us that we yield the strongest returns when we focus on the years from birth to age five and have a very strong link to quality K–3 education.

This means following several years of high-quality early childhood programs with high-quality elementary school experiences in order to boost school readiness and ongoing achievement, especially for at-risk children.

Importantly, research also tells us that the role families play in supporting their children's learning is key. Building strong reciprocal relationships with families in early childhood settings benefits children, strengthens families, and ultimately enriches schools.

The bottom line is that we have the research needed to radically disrupt long-standing patterns of achievement disparities and avoid their associated costs—to individuals, to school systems, and to society.

## **State Innovation and Policy Change**

During the past decade, states have demonstrated promising momentum on early childhood issues. Even with the most recent financial challenges gripping the nation, many state leaders have continued their push for greater investments and innovation in early childhood education. Driven by the desire to ensure that children enter school ready to learn, more states than ever before are investing in infant and toddler programs, home visiting, childcare, and preschool. According to Pre-K Now, all but 10 states provide some form of state-funded pre-K and will spend a total of \$5.3 billion in FY2010. States are developing innovative funding strategies, such as incorporating early childhood programs in the core funding formula for public education, and mobilizing significant private and philanthropic investments.

As they reflect on the multiple settings in which young children spend much of their day, states are beginning to build systems to ensure quality and accountability across childcare, state pre-K, Head Start, Early Head Start, early childhood special education, and other program types. States have established standards for early learning and program quality, and many are implementing quality rating and improvement systems and cross-program professional development initiatives. Some states have developed new governance structures—departments devoted to early childhood, P–20 councils and other interagency

structures—to increase coordination of the full complement of early childhood programs. The new federal requirement and resources to establish State Advisory Councils on Early Childhood Education and Care is another lever for facilitating this process.

While many chiefs are leading and contributing to early childhood innovations in their states, they are also charting a new course for education reform, based on a new goal of preparing all students to graduate with requisite skills and knowledge to succeed in postsecondary education and employment. As they advance this strategy, there are multiple ways to link and align emerging early childhood and public education reform efforts. For example, the Council's groundbreaking work with the governors to develop common standards for K–12 education will create new opportunities to update and align early childhood learning standards to ensure consistency of expectations as children move from early childhood programs into the elementary grades. Similarly, new efforts to build state longitudinal education data systems provide opportunities to strengthen the quality and use of data on young children, early childhood programs, and the early childhood workforce.

### *New Federal Leadership*

Federal attention to the importance of the years from birth to age five and the role the government should play in supporting quality early learning opportunities is expanding. For example, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act supported significant expansion of Head Start, Early Head Start, and the Child Care Development Block Grant, and the proposed Early Learning Challenge Fund will invest \$1 billion a year for the next eight years

to build more comprehensive, quality state early learning systems for children from birth to age five. In addition, several other federal education reform efforts touch on the importance of the early years and begin to establish a policy pathway for learning from cradle to career. Both Race to the Top and the new education innovation agenda create opportunities for public education systems to reach down to the early years and institute practices that will enhance school readiness. There are also new federal partnership efforts to advance early childhood system reform. The Departments of Health and Human Services and Education are working to remove barriers to coordinating early learning standards, program standards,

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workforce development, data systems, health promotion, and family engagement policies.

With research guiding the way and a solid commitment to action at the state and federal levels, America is poised to take the necessary steps to finally build a continuum of quality early learning opportunities for our youngest children. The time for establishing state-led early childhood systems is here. But this is not just about the earliest years—important as they are. It is also about the dawn of a new state-federal partnership to end the acceptance of mediocrity in public education and build a cradle-to-career education system characterized by high quality, transparency, and high outcomes for every child.



# ADVANCING A NEW GENERATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

Chiefs recognize that serious action is needed in four areas if we are to reduce the achievement gap and ensure all children enter school ready for sustained success:

- We must build coherent state early childhood systems.
- We must define and demand quality in all early childhood settings.
- We must mutually align the early childhood system with K–3 schooling and beyond.
- We must craft a new state-federal partnership that supports high-quality early childhood opportunities for all, especially those children most at risk.

## Building Coherent State Early Childhood Systems

We know too well that the current fragmented assortment of early childhood programs must be radically overhauled. It is harmful to children because it fails to demand consistent and quality learning opportunities; it is frustrating for families who cannot get the services they need to support their children’s early learning and development; it is overwhelming for local school districts and community agencies as they grapple with multiple funding streams, each with their own rules, regulations, and

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accounting mechanisms; and it is highly inefficient for states who have a vested interest in making sure that all young children have the early experiences that prepare them for success in school and life. To advance a new generation of early learning opportunities, we must move from a conglomeration of categorical programs to a unified system that maximizes public and private investment, is outcome driven, and provides consistent support for program quality and research-based practices.

Chiefs support a coherent system for early childhood programs that addresses standards, assessments, data, professional development, and

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accountability. If we are to be serious about eliminating the achievement gap, these policies and infrastructure elements need to apply to all settings where young children spend time outside of parental supervision—including but not limited to childcare centers and family childcare, early childhood special education, Early Head Start, Head Start, and state pre-K programs.

**Standards:** Uniform standards for children’s learning, program quality, and teachers are needed to establish a consistent level of high-quality, developmentally appropriate early learning opportunities across all early childhood programs and settings. It is essential that all early learning programs in a state share common *early learning standards*. Such standards must define what young children need to know and be able to accomplish across all key domains of development. Similarly, all early learning programs in a state should share common *program quality standards*. Program quality standards define what a quality program

does and how it operates. Finally, *teacher standards* should define core competencies needed to create rich early learning opportunities that are developmentally appropriate and engage children in active learning.

**Assessments:** Two types of assessment are needed to document and guide improvement in program quality and effectiveness. First, it is imperative that states build a system for ongoing *assessment of program quality* to ensure all programs are implementing standards for program quality and for teacher quality. Program quality assessment efforts should include observing and rating how well teachers support and extend learning opportunities, based on children’s interests, past experiences, and in light of the full range of learning standards. Information gathered through these assessments should be used to guide technical assistance and professional development efforts in a continuous program improvement effort. Second, a *child assessment* effort is needed to document how well young children are progressing in cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and physical development, as well as in approaches to learning (such as curiosity, persistence, and self-regulation). A growing number of states are developing such assessments to provide an additional form of feedback on the overall performance of their early childhood system and to set priorities for program improvement and professional development.

**Data:** Chiefs recognize data is an essential tool for analyzing outcomes, understanding the effectiveness of interventions, and advancing quality. With the push for accountability and

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transparency as part of No Child Left Behind, states have developed enhanced data systems for elementary and secondary schooling and are beginning to link with early childhood and

postsecondary education data. Improving data on the status of young children, the characteristics of early childhood programs, and the early childhood workforce is a key component of an overall state early childhood system. Linking early childhood data to K–12 and beyond can help policy leaders and educators understand the interplay of children’s learning opportunities, and their progress toward developmental and academic benchmarks, as they participate in a variety of early childhood and early school programs. Furthermore, when data systems are integrated across other child and family services systems (e.g., health, human service, and mental health), even more can be uncovered about what combinations of interventions are most effective in facilitating children’s cognitive, linguistic, emotional, and social development.

**Professional Development:** If our goal is to provide high-quality active learning opportunities for all children, then it is essential we build a unified professional development

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system that prepares all early childhood professionals regardless of where they are employed. Just as we find in K–12, early childhood outcomes can be correlated with the level of teacher training and the ongoing support and education that teachers receive. Given this, chiefs recognize that serious action and substantial investment is needed to build a professional development system that produces highly effective teachers, administrators, family workers, mentor coaches, and other support staff.

Teachers of our youngest children need to be a master of many trades. They need to be fully aware of all domains of child development. They need to understand how to devise activities to stimulate active learning and provide individualized instruction that is appropriate for each child. They need know how to assess children and how to use assessment information to adapt the curriculum to the needs of individuals and groups of children. And they need

to know how to partner with families to meaningfully engage them in their child's early learning. Many teachers possess many of these skills: the challenge is to ensure all teachers possess all skills so every child can reach their fullest potential.

For several years there has been a movement afoot to increase the number of teachers with a Bachelor of Arts degree and specialized early childhood training in Head Start, state pre-K, and other programs. However even an undergraduate degree program may not be sufficient to match the importance of the work and ensure that teachers are fully prepared to provide high-quality, developmentally appropriate services to infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Accordingly, chiefs need to lead the charge in building a comprehensive professional development system that includes opportunities for pre-service, in-service, coaching, mentoring, reflection, and planning with colleagues. As recently articulated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, professional development systems should incorporate professional standards, career pathways, articulation across higher education programs and institutions, an advisory structure, data collection, and financing.

**Accountability:** A final component of a state early childhood system is a consistent mechanism for documenting and improving the performance of all programs to achieve the best outcomes for children and measurably advance school readiness. A state early childhood accountability system uses data generated through standards-based assessments of children and program quality to guide and motivate a continuous program improvement cycle. Local programs receive targeted technical assistance and professional development to remedy deficiencies and foster better outcomes for children. States also identify local programs that are unusually successful in delivering high-quality learning opportunities and fostering success for children as an additional resource for program improvement efforts. The system includes provisions for replacing local programs that persistently fail to meet standards even after receiving technical assistance. However, the suggested approach is commitment to use the tools of standards, assessments, data, and

professional development in a rigorous effort to improve the effectiveness of all publicly funded early childhood programs—not a downward extension of high stakes use of child assessment data in early childhood programs.

## Ensuring Quality Programs

If we are serious about ending the achievement gap, then access to high-quality, voluntary early childhood programs must be a right for all American children, not a privilege for a few. This is especially urgent for children with complex life situations that place them at risk. As they work to build coherent early childhood systems in their states, chiefs must focus on supporting and

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demanding high quality through the tools of standards, child and program assessments, data, professional development, and accountability. Key dimensions of high-quality, effective programs also include meaningful engagement with families, curriculum and ongoing child assessment, and coordinated services that meet the comprehensive needs of children and families, especially those at risk.

**Family Engagement:** Family engagement is a reciprocal partnership between families and early childhood programs, grounded in mutual respect and a shared responsibility for children's development. A growing body of research tells us that when families are actively engaged, both child and family well-being are

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enhanced as well as overall program quality. Nurturing this relationship in the early years also establishes families as their child's lifelong advocate for quality education.

The key is for programs to work in partnership with families to develop a continuum of opportunities for meaningful family engagement that matches the interest and availability of families and for staff to receive training and support on effectively engaging families. For some families and programs, family engagement might be as simple as sharing basic information on the individual child and background on typical child development, and suggesting child-family activities that can be carried out at home to reinforce the learning in the program. For others, it might be families volunteering in the classroom, helping on field trips, or serving on committees that govern the program. We also recognize that some families will choose not to have their children enrolled in a formal early childhood program. In this case, providing support to families through special outreach, home visiting, developmental playgroups and other opportunities in the community can serve as additional vehicles for ensuring families have the tools they need to best support their children's early learning.

Chiefs believe that family engagement is an important ingredient of quality programs and that early childhood professionals should be expected to work in partnership with families to develop, implement, and monitor a plan for achieving increasing levels of engagement.

**Curriculum and Child Assessment:** While states should not dictate a specific curriculum, they should provide curricular frameworks related to their early learning standards and require that all early childhood programs select or develop a research-based curriculum and provide ongoing training to ensure that it is implemented. The curriculum selected by individual programs should reflect a fit with both the standards for early learning and program standards, provide a framework for content-rich learning strategies, and guide ongoing assessment to allow teachers to adapt, tailor, and extend learning experiences to meet the needs of individual children. Such assessments help ensure that children are receiving the most appropriate interventions that will allow them to

reach their full potential. Early screening and assessment is also important for identifying children with special needs and proactively supporting their unique development.

### ***Comprehensive Services and Collaboration Across Systems:***

High-quality early childhood programs recognize the complex needs of young children and work with community partners to ensure their needs are met. Undiagnosed vision, hearing, nutrition, health, mental health and disabilities conditions are only some of the barriers that limit the healthy development of young children and prevent them from fully engaging in early learning

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opportunities. While early childhood programs cannot meet all needs of families, they should work to connect families with public agencies, foundations, and volunteers. From centralized case management, to blended funding, to coordinated data collection and analysis, we can be more effective in delivering quality, comprehensive, and individualized services to children and families if we work across systems to meet the unique needs of those most at risk.

### ***Aligning and Integrating Early Childhood and K-3 Schooling***

While the core focus of this policy statement is on the birth-to-age-five learning years, it is also imperative that we align and integrate the early childhood system with kindergarten-to-grade-three schooling to ensure consistency and continuity of high-quality educational opportunities. Children and families will benefit from a close partnership between early childhood and kindergarten-to-grade-three programs so that the process of entering formal public education is demystified and stressful

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transitions minimized. Elementary education will benefit too. For example, if kindergarten and primary grade teachers could draw on data from children's early childhood program experiences, they could plan more tailored, individualized learning opportunities for each child.

Building systemic linkages between early childhood and kindergarten to grade three means working to align standards, assessments, curricula, data, professional development, accountability, family engagement, and comprehensive services:

- Standards for children's early learning should be mutually aligned with the common core K–12 standards outlined by chiefs and governors. The goals of aligning standards should be to promote more intentional pathways to foster children's progress and accomplishments in a full range of developmental domains and academic skills and knowledge. Such efforts must avoid the presumption that a unilateral downward extension of public education methods to early childhood is desired or expected. States can also explore ways to extend and adapt early childhood program quality standards to encompass criteria for high-quality kindergarten and primary grade teaching practices and learning opportunities.
- Curricula, as well as child and program assessment systems across the birth-through-third-grade continuum should be designed in tandem to inform

teacher planning, communication with parents, and continuous improvement of programs and pedagogy.

- Collection and sharing of data should enable teams of early childhood and elementary school teachers and administrators to study the trajectories of children's learning and development as they progress through a sequence of different early childhood and early school experiences. Convening such study teams to reflect on longitudinal data could build a stronger sense of collective responsibility to reverse longstanding achievement disparities and shortfalls.
- Professional development should be integrated across the birth-through-primary-grade years, with lead teachers in birth-to-five programs possessing the same preparation as those in elementary schools but with added training in early child development. Joint professional development efforts can help build a shared understanding of early childhood development and the importance of an intentional sequence of learning opportunities in all areas of the curriculum in early childhood programs and elementary schools.
- Accountability and program improvement policies and mechanisms should be mutually aligned to create a more coherent and effective continuum of teaching and learning that capitalizes on the best ideas from early childhood and public education to support optimal outcomes for children.
- Purposeful efforts are needed to build upon the relationships established between families and early learning programs so that all families enter formal schooling with a clear understanding of the magnitude of the role they play in



their child's learning, and so that public school teachers welcome and support active family engagement.

- Continuation of comprehensive services for children and families is necessary, especially for those most at risk who have needs in non-academic areas that can hinder their ability to learn when not addressed. Early childhood programs and elementary schools should work in partnership with community agencies to guarantee seamless services and support throughout the early learning years.

### **Crafting a New State-Federal Partnership**

To build an early childhood system that supports quality programs, it is essential that the federal and state governments work hand in hand. States should take the lead in developing and managing early childhood systems, with the

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federal government taking the lead in removing policy barriers and in research and development. At the same time, states and the federal government must work together to develop a stable, adequate, and equitable system to finance high-quality early childhood programs.

Accordingly, new state-federal collaboration is needed in three key areas: systems change, research and development, and financing:

**Systems Change:** Leaders at the federal and state level need to work together in a good faith reengineering effort to remove the barriers that stand in the way of creating coherent, inclusive early childhood systems. This requires a

team approach to construct a single framework of policies and standards; join forces to support a common approach to child and program

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assessment; build a unified system of data on children, programs, and the workforce; and pool resources for professional development and program improvement. The goal is to move quickly toward a more coherent system with more efficient administrative requirements and easier navigation for families. There are many technical mechanisms that can facilitate this movement—waivers, demonstrations, and technical amendments are a few.

**Research and Development:** The federal government can serve an important role in incubating new ideas, developing tools, evaluating the efficacy of interventions, and supporting dissemination and replication of proven innovations. For example, states and the entire early childhood field would benefit from federal efforts to develop and validate a new generation of child assessment tools that will enable programs and parents to better understand children's strengths and attributes and to document their progress in all domains of early learning and development. The federal government should also evaluate the type and quantity of interventions that yield the most promising school readiness outcomes for children with different characteristics, including English language learners. Further, the federal government should sponsor and study comprehensive birth-to-grade-three models that show promise for eradicating the achievement gap.

**Financing:** It is essential that state and federal leaders come together to design a purpose-driven, outcome-based early childhood financing system that ensures equity and supports quality. A state-federal funding partnership must provide adequate, stable funding for quality early learning programs for all families who choose to enroll their children. The partnership must fund a



comprehensive support system of standards, curricula, assessments, data, professional development, and program improvement. Further,

**A state-federal funding partnership must provide adequate, stable funding for quality early learning programs for all families who choose to enroll their children.**

the partnership must ensure additional resources for children who are at risk so that they can receive earlier, enriched, intensive, and continuous interventions. Finally, the state-federal funding partnership must provide sufficient compensation to attract, prepare, and retain high-performing early childhood professionals. Compensation should be consistent with that of teachers in the elementary grades. This job is too important to continue to relegate it to one of the lowest paid professions in America.

## A CALL TO ACTION

We know more now than ever before about the importance of the early years. Science points to tremendous neurological growth during the birth-to-age-five period, when the architecture of the brain is being developed, influencing future cognitive, social, emotional, and linguistic competence. When children are faced with multiple risks—poor health, economic insecurity, stressed families, lack of quality early learning opportunities—their chances for reaching their full potential are threatened. The costs of our domestic and international achievement gaps and the early learning opportunity gap include negative short-term effects on schools, negative long-term effects on society and our economic competitiveness, and truncated lifelong opportunities for children.

As chiefs, we must use our leadership, our passion for the power of education, and our commitment to equal opportunity to radically

reform the way our country, states, and communities support young children and their families. If we fail to do this, our hopes for a race to the top to new levels of educational performance and attainment may turn into a frightening dive to the bottom.

In the coming years, chiefs must work with our public sector counterparts in federal and state agencies, local community leaders, and the private sector to advance a new system of early childhood programs and investments. We are committed to the following actions:

- Leading to build coherent, integrated state early childhood systems. Chiefs can accelerate this movement by coming to the table with state and federal colleagues to develop consistent

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standards, assessments, data, professional development, and accountability efforts. Chiefs can establish a positive climate for collaboration when issues touch on early childhood programs under the purview of state departments of education. For example, they can offer to pool professional development resources, facilitate sharing data, build the capacity to assign identification numbers to children in varied early learning programs to link with the K–12 data system, or create a team approach to monitoring local programs that receive funding from multiple state and federal agencies.

- Leading to craft policies and mobilize resources to provide high-quality learning opportunities in all early childhood classrooms and settings. Chiefs can advocate for defining research-based program quality standards, extending them to apply to all forms of publicly-sponsored early learning programs, and fight for the funding necessary to enable all local programs to meet high-quality standards.
- Leading to align the early childhood system with K–3 schooling and beyond. Chiefs can be proactive in convening elementary school and early childhood leaders to align policies, systems, and practices in the areas of standards, assessments, data, professional development, and family engagement. They can set the tone for a respectful, mutual planning effort and avoid the presumption that a unilateral downward extension of public education methods to early childhood is desired or expected.

- Leading to craft a new state-federal fiscal and policy partnership to advance high-quality early childhood learning opportunities for all children, with a concentration on those most at risk. Chiefs can call for a state and federal cross-department summit (and ongoing follow-up mechanisms) to define a new compact for early childhood funding and policy leadership.

Chiefs eagerly embrace this opportunity to build a high-quality, high-performing early childhood system to enable all children to develop the foundational skills and dispositions they need to fully engage in lifelong learning. We stand ready to work through CCSSO to promote a conjoined early childhood and public education reform movement in our states and in partnership with the federal government. Together with families, teachers, researchers, child advocates, and other policy leaders, we are confident that America will act on the opportunity to build a continuum of early learning opportunities to eradicate the achievement gap and provide a more promising future for every child. ■

