



Early Education Initiative: Issue Brief

10 New Ideas for Early Education in the 111th Congress

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As a new congress and new administration take their places in Washington, early education is attracting more attention. The 111th Congress will have numerous opportunities to enact policies that improve access, quality, efficiency, and alignment in early education, including the forthcoming economic stimulus package and the scheduled reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The New America Foundation's Early Education Initiative proposes 10 new policy ideas to improve access, quality, and alignment in early education from preschool through the early elementary school years.

- 1. Ensure that school construction funds are available to support the expansion of high-quality early education programs.** Lack of adequate facilities is a major obstacle to expansion of high-quality PreK programs at the state and local level. The House economic stimulus bill includes federal funding to modernize, renovate, and repair public school facilities. Policymakers must ensure that federal funds are available to support both construction and modernization of K-12 public schools, and the construction or renovation of safe, healthy learning environments for preschool-aged children. It is particularly important to ensure that community-based PreKindergarten providers, not just school districts, have access to these funds. Community-based providers often find it difficult to afford, retrofit - or even find - space for their programs, particularly in urban areas. They have more facilities needs, and yet fewer options for funding facilities improvements, than do public school districts. Because community-based providers are not bound by the same bureaucracy as the public schools, they can put new investments to work more quickly.
- 2. Recruit talented individuals to become qualified PreK and early elementary school teachers by providing expedited alternative routes to PreK teaching.** A lack of human capital is the major obstacle to expanding access to high-quality early education. As people lose their jobs in finance, technology, construction, and other fields, we have a unique opportunity to recruit these individuals to the field of early education. However, few programs currently exist to help them acquire the knowledge, skills, and credentials required to work with young children. Early childhood educator preparation programs that currently exist at colleges and universities often take several years to complete and are of poor quality. As part of the stimulus package, the federal government should invest in the development of new, high-quality alternative certification programs that help recent college graduates, mid-career professionals, and experienced early childhood educators quickly learn what they need to get jobs in early education classrooms and provide developmentally appropriate, high-quality learning experiences to more children.
- 3. Support the ability of charter schools to offer high-quality PreK programs.** A growing number of charter schools across the country offer high-quality PreK programs aligned with their elementary schools. But state and federal laws often create unnecessary obstacles for charter schools that want to operate PreK programs. Congress should alter the federal charter schools program to better support charter schools that want to offer PreK and to create incentives for states to change laws that block charter schools from offering PreK. First, alter the definition of a charter school in section 5210 to include charter schools that offer prekindergarten. This would clarify PreK charter school programs' eligibility for federal charter school grants. Second, establish a funding priority in section 5202 for states that allow charter schools to access state PreK funding on an

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equitable basis with school districts and other non-profit organizations in the state. This creates an incentive for states to allow charter schools to offer PreK and provide them equitable access to PreK funding. Finally, in section 5205, as a national activity, require the Secretary of Education to provide charter schools with assistance in applying for federal early childhood funds, including Head Start and childcare funds, and to confer with the Secretary of Health and Human Services to eliminate barriers that prevent charter schools from gaining access to these funds.

4. **Strengthen early elementary standards.** The years from PreK through 3rd grade lay a critical foundation for children's later learning. Research shows that children who don't have a solid foundation in basic knowledge and skills by the end of 3rd grade are at high risk for later school failure. Yet recent research by the American Federation of Teachers shows that state standards for the early elementary years are the weakest. They are often too vague to provide teachers solid guidance on what children should learn during this critical period. Some states group standards for multiple early elementary grades into a single set of standards, which is unhelpful to teachers and cannot support curricular alignment from grade to grade. Other states lack standards for grades K-2 altogether. As part of ESEA reauthorization, federal policymakers should require all states to establish clear, specific, aligned standards for children's learning in language, math, science, and social-emotional development in each year, from PreK through 3rd grade, and ensure that these standards are aligned with both the states' early learning standards and their academic standards for grades 4 through 12.
5. **Allow and encourage chronically failing elementary schools to be reconstituted as PreK to 3rd Early Education Academies.** No Child Left Behind requires "failing" schools (those that do not make "adequate yearly progress" for five consecutive years) to develop a "reconstitution" plan, and the law offers a menu of options for school restructuring. But while some of these options show promise, there is little evidence that most restructuring options are effective in improving low-performing schools. In fact, data from states with large numbers of schools in restructuring suggest a significant amount of them have seen little change. Congress should amend NCLB to encourage states and districts to reconstitute chronically low-performing elementary schools as PreK-3rd Early Education Academies. The creation of Early Education Academies is a research-based approach to serving children from PreKindergarten through 3rd grade (ages 3-8) that offers a compelling vision for whole-school reform. Such academies deliver a vertically aligned curriculum emphasizing literacy, language, and social-emotional development in the context of a full complement of core academic subjects and provide time for teachers to work together in grade level and disciplinary teams to align curriculum and instruction. The academies could be designed as neighborhood schools or schools of choice. The older elementary school grades could be reconstituted as a separate school-within-a-school or students in those grades could be first in line to transfer to higher-performing public schools. This approach would provide students a firm education foundation by the end of 3rd grade.
6. **Set aside a portion of school construction funding to support the reconstitution of chronically low-performing elementary schools as PreK to 3rd Early Education Academies.** Reconstituting existing elementary schools as PreK to 3rd Early Education Academies will require alterations to existing school facilities. School systems will want to create smaller schools within schools and ensure that facilities are designed appropriately for young children. A portion of any federal school construction funding should be set aside for this purpose, with priority for the most chronically low-performing elementary schools.
7. **Tap supplemental educational services and public school choice set-aside funds for high-quality PreK programs.** NCLB requires school districts to make available up to 20 percent of their Title I allocation to provide public school choice and supplemental educational services (SES) for children in schools identified for school improvement. But only a fraction of eligible students take advantage of these options, and as a result, many districts spend less than 20 percent of their Title I allocation on these programs. Congress should amend Section 1116 of the law to require all school districts with schools identified for improvement to devote the full 20 percent of their Title I allocation to public school choice, supplemental services, and a third option: high-quality PreK for 3- and 4-year-olds living in communities with schools in need of improvement. Districts that do not spend 20 percent of their Title I allocation on choice and SES would be required to transfer the remaining money to high-quality PreK programs (including programs operated by community-based providers). This policy would increase funding available for high-quality PreK programs, target that funding to children at risk of eventually attending failing schools, and counter concerns that NCLB's requirements currently reduce Title I funds available for PreK. It would also reduce incentives for school districts to create barriers that prevent parents from exercising choice and SES options, because districts would have to spend the full 20 percent regardless of how many parents requested choice and SES.

8. **Ensure that alignment between PreK and the K-12 public schools is included in the definition of quality for any new federal early education program.** Bills related to universal PreK and early education introduced in the current Congress include provisions to ensure the quality of federally funded PreK programs. These include stipulations for teacher quality, class size, parent involvement, and comprehensive services. Most of these proposals have not addressed an important element of quality: ensuring that the standards, curriculum, and teaching methods used in PreK programs are aligned with those of the public schools that children will attend after leaving PreK. Such alignment is crucial to ensure that PreK programs prepare children to succeed in elementary school and to fight what is known as "the fade out" of PreK learning gains that often occurs in the elementary years. Congress should require providers that receive funding to ensure that their standards and curriculum are aligned with those of the public elementary schools children will attend a year or two later. It should also make sure that PreK and early elementary teachers have opportunities for collaboration and shared professional development. States receiving new federal early education funding must demonstrate that their state early learning or PreK standards are aligned with their K-12 academic standards.
9. **Improve accountability for early education programs.** Governments must ensure that the early education providers receiving their funds are held accountable for students' progress. However, there are unique challenges to measuring young children's learning that complicate efforts to hold providers accountable. One solution is to improve states' and school districts' ability to track the long-term outcomes for children participating in early education programs. Once reauthorized, the NCLB will most likely allow states to use growth models to determine whether schools are making "adequate yearly progress." To do so, states must establish systems that track individual students' performance over time, starting with their PreK experiences. These systems would provide an opportunity for states to evaluate the long-term impact of PreK investments. NCLB reauthorization should require state longitudinal student data systems developed under the law to include information about any publicly funded PreK or Head Start programs children attend, including individual identifiers for each center attended and each child's PreK teacher, as well as details on those teacher's qualifications. The same individual student identifier should follow children from PreK through K-12 schooling and beyond. Including early education data in student longitudinal data systems will allow policymakers to evaluate PreK programs based on long-term results-not test scores for toddlers.
10. **Target elementary absenteeism.** Recent research has documented alarmingly high rates of chronic absenteeism-children missing at least 10 percent of school days in a year-in our nation's elementary schools, particularly among low-income students and schools in impoverished areas. Evidence also shows that chronic absenteeism in the early grades dramatically reduces a child's likelihood of achieving at grade level. While schools can't teach students who aren't in school, there are a variety of things schools and districts can do to reduce rates of chronic absenteeism. Congress should fund a demonstration program of competitive grants to school districts and municipalities to lower rates of elementary absenteeism in high-poverty communities. These grants should support the development, implementation, and rigorous evaluation of systemic initiatives to reduce absenteeism, including the creation of data systems that keep track of which children are most often absent and help educators and social workers determine how best to respond.

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