



# A Fair Start: Ensuring all Students Are Ready to Learn

## Education

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The National Conference of State Legislatures is the bipartisan organization dedicated to serving the lawmakers and staffs of the nation's 50 states, its commonwealths and territories.

NCSL provides research, technical assistance and opportunities for policymakers to exchange ideas on the most pressing state issues, and is an effective and respected advocate for the interests of the states in the American federal system. Its objectives are:

- Improve the quality and effectiveness of state legislatures
- Promote policy innovation and communication among state legislatures
- Ensure state legislatures a strong, cohesive voice in the federal system

The conference operates from offices in Denver, Colorado and Washington, D.C.

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# State Policy and Research for Early Education Working Group (SPREE)

The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) formed the State Policy and Research for Early Education Working Group (SPREE) in 2016 with support from the Heising-Simons Foundation to develop a bipartisan framework to guide and assist state policymakers as they work toward the goal of ensuring that every child is ready to learn.

The approach highlighted in this report is reinforced by a 2016 NCSL publication, “[No Time to Lose](#),” resulting from the work of NCSL’s International Education Study Group, which studied top-performing countries to determine the most critical elements of successful education systems for state policymakers to consider.

SPREE includes 16 members: a bipartisan composition of eight state legislators, two legislative staff and six early learning researchers. Initial meetings included presentations and working sessions where SPREE members heard from several early learning experts and deliberated top priorities for the framework.

SPREE members concluded that addressing educational equity, the opportunity gap, school readiness and other complex challenges facing children from birth to age 8 is a critical task facing this country, and state policymakers are in a unique position to help produce impactful outcomes for children and youth. SPREE members deeply explored important questions: How can we ensure that all children begin their education at a fair starting line? Who are the student groups most in need of support? Why is this the most opportune time for action? What tools, evidence and resources do state policymakers and legislative staff need to effectively hold these discussions?

SPREE members have created a framework for policymakers to consider their policy options to improve early learning for all students. The report provides an impetus for bipartisan and impactful policy and intentional leadership that improves access and opportunity for all young learners.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NCSL is grateful to the state legislators, legislative staff and partner members of the State Policy and Research for Early Education (SPREE) Working Group whose tireless efforts, critical and effective collaboration, and persistence were essential in the development of this publication. We are also grateful to the Heising-Simons Foundation for making this effort possible in the first place and the guidance of Chhandasi Patel and Rebecca Gomez for their support and insights. Our youngest children are the country’s most valuable resource and play a critical role in our future economic, social and global well-being and competitiveness. It is our hope that this resource enables state policymakers, legislative staff and the public to hold informed discussions and ensure positive change so that each and every child arrives to school ready for success. Lastly, this publication is dedicated to the memory of Julie Davis Bell, former NCSL Education Group Director, whose visionary leadership, critical feedback, support and friendship will forever be missed.

NCSL Staff involved in this work include Julie Davis Bell, Michelle Exstrom, Julie Poppe, Chloe Sweem, Ashley Wallace, Madeleine Webster and Matt Weyer.



# Executive Summary

If a child’s education is considered to be a marathon, then it is imperative that each student begins the race at a fair starting line to ensure they have an equal chance to succeed. In the U.S., however, where children start, and their eventual educational success, can often be predicted by their race and socioeconomic status.

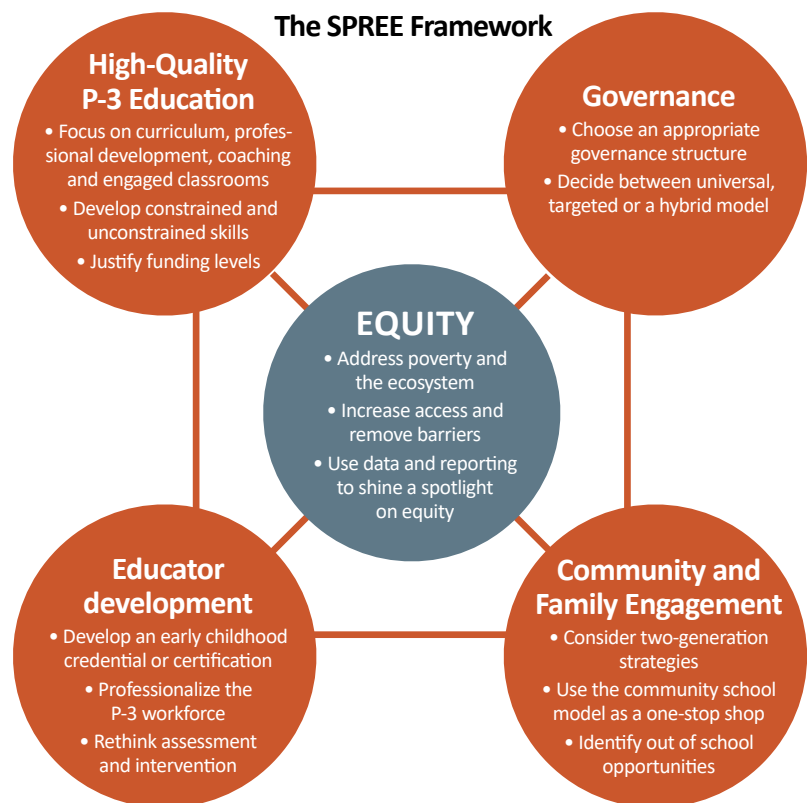
Large gaps often exist in reading and math skills for low-income students or those of color when they enter kindergarten, and these gaps persist, if not widen, throughout the student’s education.<sup>1</sup> This is not the case in other industrialized countries that outperform the U.S. on international comparisons of student achievement, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) exam.

Research shows that high-quality early learning programs are significant in successfully preparing students for their education marathon. They often reduce retention rates and special education placements and improve graduation rates.<sup>2</sup> The opposite is also true. When low-income students do not have access to high-quality early learning programs, they are more likely to drop out of school, never attend college, be arrested for a violent crime or become a teen parent.<sup>3</sup>

State policymakers can ensure that each student has access to an effective “starting position” through state policies and practices that support high-quality early learning opportunities. In considering the policies that are best for each state, the State Policy and Research for Early Education (SPREE) working group created the SPREE framework that legislators might use to guide their work.

SPREE members suggest equity as the core principle for early learning. Students are more likely to succeed if they have equal access to the resources and educational rigor at the right moment in their education, despite race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, family background or family income. Other principles in the framework include program quality, governance, family and community engagement, and educator development.

This report outlines a series of practical strategies and policy options for state legislators to enhance their state policy discussions, along with possible actions to ensure that every student has an equal start to their educational marathon and a solid foundation to finish strong.



# Early Childhood Development and the Opportunity Gap

Science has taught us that a child's experiences in the first three years have an impact on their brain development. During this time, the brain creates 1 million connections every second that will lay pathways for future development.<sup>4</sup> When children do not receive adequate opportunities to create these connections, or have adverse experiences, gaps in their development open and continue to form throughout their childhood, affecting their eventual education achievement and life outcomes. Parents' poverty level and educational attainment can correlate to the formation of learning gaps. If a parent does not have adequate literacy skills or does not have the time to read to or interact with the child, or if the child experiences hunger, environmental instability or neighborhood violence, as can be experienced by those living in poverty, the child's developmental potential can be compromised. To create a fair starting line, we can look to the research for the factors that help to ensure students are ready for school:

- Healthy physical development
- Fine and gross motor development
- Language skills/oral language development
- Preliteracy and numeracy skills
- Self-regulation, executive functioning and social-emotional factors
- Family engagement

There are multiple contexts for developing the factors listed above: at home, in early care and education programs and in the classroom. It is important to consider how these contexts and programs align to create a systemic approach to ensure early learning gains are sustained through kindergarten and beyond.

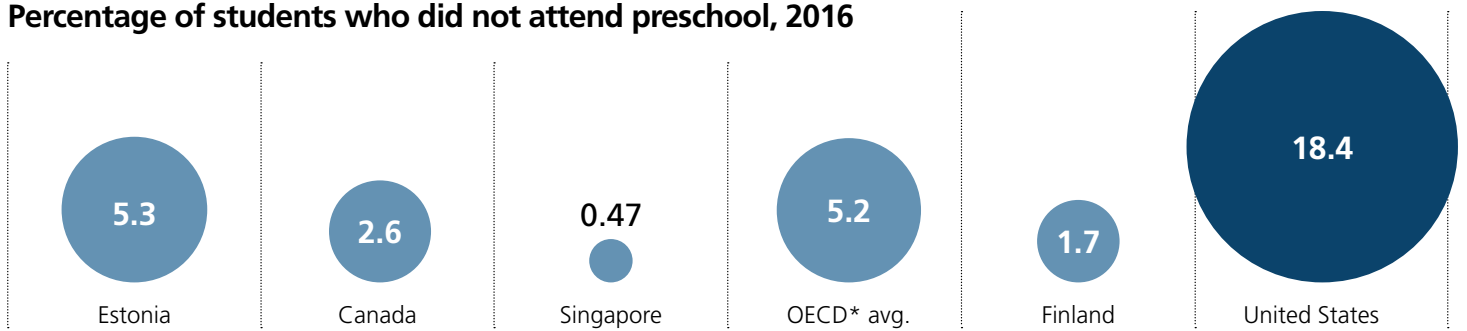
In early learners, the opportunity gap opens when there is a lack of developmental and educational inputs before kindergarten. These inputs can include access to enrichment opportunities, high-quality early learning programs and positive parent-child relationships. The opportunity gap results in achievement gaps for these early learners as measured by third-grade reading or math proficiency.<sup>5</sup>

High-quality early learning is vital, producing enhanced language, preliteracy and numeracy skills, self-regulation, executive functioning, a greater likelihood of high school graduation and a decreased likelihood of special education placement and retention. It has also been demonstrated to be especially beneficial for low-income, Hispanic/Latino, African-American students and dual language learners (DLLs, those learning English while also mastering their native language).<sup>6</sup>

Yet low-income and minority students are less likely to access high-quality early learning programs,<sup>7</sup> perpetuating opportunity and achievement gaps. Some experts argue that ensuring all students have access to high-quality early learning will help them begin in a fair "starting place." Others would argue that we should go further by providing additional supports to move our system past one of equality to one of equity. (See Principle One.) These extra supports might include home visits to assist parents with early development and literacy and additional resources for parents who cannot afford a high-quality early learning program.

Addressing the opportunity gap can also help alleviate intergenerational poverty. This afflicts generations of low-income families as the effects of poverty make it difficult to move to a higher income bracket, perpetuating the opportunity gap over generations, along with its associated outcomes. In fact, 43 percent of children born to parents living in the lowest 20th percentile of income are themselves living in the same quintile as adults.<sup>8</sup> Closing the opportunity gap could bring about significant decreases in the millions of people affected by intergenerational poverty.

## Percentage of students who did not attend preschool, 2016



\*Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

Source: NCSL Webinar, 2017

There is reason to be hopeful. In communities across the United States, exemplary early learning programs are closing the opportunity gap and creating structures that ensure success continues in kindergarten through third grade to establish positive academic trajectories and life outcomes. We can also look to international education leaders for their approaches to early learning.

### INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

Academic performance of 15-year-old students in the United States has fallen significantly compared to other industrialized nations since 2000. In mathematics, the U.S. ranked 19th in 2000, falling to 36th in 2012. In science, the U.S. ranked 14th in 2000, falling to 25th in 2016.<sup>9,10</sup> These statistics hold serious implications for our global competitiveness, economy and societal well-being.

Early education was found to be a priority and a right in studies of international education leaders.<sup>11,12</sup> Currently, access in the United States for 3- and 4-year-olds is 15 percent and 43 percent respectively for state-funded prekindergarten (pre-K), Head Start and Special Education pre-K.<sup>13</sup> Compared to high-performing countries, and even the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average, the United States has fallen significantly behind in the percentage of students attending any preschool, and ranks 35th among developed nations in enrollment of 3- through 5-year-olds.<sup>14</sup>

### STEPS FOR LEGISLATORS: THE SPREE FRAMEWORK

The framework designed by SPREE members and described in this report can be used by state legislators to identify a priority area for redesign as part of a larger cohesive vision for pre-K through third grade (P-3) education in their states. Each of the five principles in the SPREE Framework seek to provide a coherent set of strategies to enhance early learning outcomes and provide options to fit a state's unique political and economic context.

SPREE members encourage policymakers to keep equity in mind during their policy discussions and subsequent actions. The other principles within the SPREE framework include P-3 program quality, governance, family and community engagement, and educator preparation. Within each principle is a series of actionable strategies to create systemic enhancements in P-3 education. Existing state-level policies are then presented to provide real-world examples and to serve as models for policy discussion and potential action.

# Principle One: Equity

## STRATEGIES

- Address poverty and the ecosystem.
- Increase access and remove barriers.
- Use data and reporting to target services and shine a spotlight on equity.

Educational equity is the assurance that every student has access to the resources and educational rigor they need during their education despite race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, family background or family income.<sup>15</sup> This access ideally prepares all students to be active, healthy and contributing members of society. Equity is meant to underlie every principle in the SPREE framework and to be a fundamental part of policy discussions when addressing P-3 education.

Research has demonstrated that supporting the learning and development of young children matters greatly, yet significant

gaps exist in opportunity and school readiness, especially for low-income students and students of color. For a prosperous economic and social future in the United States, all children should have an equitable place at the starting line. Three strategies are presented within the equity principle to provide readers with actionable steps to begin moving the needle on educational equity. These strategies are followed by state legislative examples to illustrate how these strategies map onto policy.

### ADDRESS POVERTY AND THE ECOSYSTEM

SPREE members acknowledge that to produce effective outcomes, policies should account for the unique backgrounds, contexts and ecosystems affecting children. This means addressing the variables that deeply impact children's ability to develop and learn: poverty, mental health, hunger/nutrition, self-regulation and social-emotional skills. Policies need to be flexible to account for differences in context, population, language, concentration of poverty and underserved populations (e.g., DLLs, who also may live in poverty). Knowledge of the sometimes traumatic and challenging environments in which some students live is also important when considering educational policy solutions. Recognizing these variables increases the likelihood that policies will equitably and effectively serve young students who are most in need.

### INCREASE ACCESS AND REMOVE BARRIERS

Accessing high-quality programs can often be a challenge for families; a lack of awareness of the benefits of early learning, difficulty navigating the early learning system and lack of affordable options all create barriers. Once a child has entered pre-K, early screening provides important information on their language and literacy skills, cognition and motor skills, and their social-emotional development, allowing teachers and school leaders to better differentiate instruction and assessment. Needs assessments and coordination activities required under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) enhance policymakers' abilities to effectively identify barriers, increase access to high-quality programs and improve transitions from pre-K to elementary school.

### USE DATA AND REPORTING TO TARGET SERVICES AND SHINE A SPOTLIGHT ON EQUITY

The ESSA requires states to gather data on the performance of all students and to disaggregate the data to discover gaps in achievement. Each state is also required to create report cards so that policymakers, parents, educators and the community can clearly see the performance of each subgroup of students. This creates an opportunity for states to bring early education to the forefront of improvement efforts. Potential areas for additional reporting include using early learning indicators (e.g., access to high quality pre-K, suspension and expulsion, climate, chronic absenteeism, school readiness)

### ESSA and Early Learning

Needs assessments, transition and other coordination and alignment activities required under ESSA will provide state legislators with valuable information:<sup>16</sup>

- Report cards must include the number and percentage of students enrolled in preschool programs.
- The state education agency must assist local districts and schools who are using Title I funds to support early learning programs and assist with transitions to elementary school.
- Local education agencies (LEAs) must ensure that their Title I preschools are complying with Head Start performance standards.
- LEAs receiving Title I funds must develop agreements and carry out coordination activities with Head Start agencies, and, if feasible, other early learning programs.



as a means to focus attention on P-3 outcomes.<sup>17</sup> Further, this data can be disaggregated by income level, language status, and race/ethnicity to further shine a spotlight on equity. This approach could begin to highlight disparities in access and school readiness and provide state legislators with the information they need to make critical decisions regarding their early learning systems.

## STATE EXAMPLES

■ **Illinois House Bill 3139 (2017):** As a measure for equity, this bill directly addresses chronic absenteeism (10 percent or more absences) by requiring every school district receiving public funds to collect and review its chronic absence data and determine what systems of support and resources are needed to re-engage students and their families. The bill makes specific reference to the early years as the critical timeframe to effectively address and eliminate chronic absenteeism.

■ **Louisiana House Bill 517 (2017):** Requires the superintendent of education to prepare a report with information that will assist policymakers and the public in assessing the extent to which the state's students have access to quality public education. The report is required to include data such as the percentage of a school's students who are economically disadvantaged, the percentage of students who are racial or ethnic minorities, the percentage of students who are English learners, the percentage of teachers determined to be highly effective, the number of teacher absences and more.

■ **Utah House Bill 200 (2008):** The UPSTART (Utah Preparing Students Today for a Rewarding Tomorrow) program provides an in-home, technology-delivered kindergarten readiness program using adaptive software to provide preschool-aged children an individualized reading, math and science curriculum at home, including a robust parent engagement program. Focused on increasing the school readiness of at-risk children and those living in rural areas, the UPSTART program is rigorously evaluated using a randomized control trial evaluation, and has demonstrated consistently positive gains for students. Moreover, longitudinal data has been gathered from the Utah UPSTART legislation and measured against state averages to determine whether the legislation had lasting effects. After studying results from seven years of implementation, the state office of education found that students who experienced UPSTART during the year before kindergarten continually outperformed state averages in preliteracy skills and state testing in grades one through four. These results carried across the overall population, as well as special education, minority, low-income, and English Learner students.

# Principle Two: High Quality P-3 Education

## STRATEGIES

- Focus on curriculum, professional development, coaching, and organized and engaged classrooms.
- Develop constrained and unconstrained skills.
- Justify funding levels.

Focusing on both structural and process elements is critical to building a high-quality P-3 environment for children. Structural elements are those that may be included in rules and regulations, such as teacher-student ratios and discipline policies. Process elements address the interactions and other processes occurring in the classroom and include teacher language, child engagement and instructional interactions. These elements are much harder to measure and regulate.

The cost of high-quality early learning conditions (conservatively ranging from \$8,500 to upwards of \$15,000 per pupil) has priced learning prior to kindergarten out of the realm of possibility for many states, potentially preventing discussions about

less costly, yet effective alternatives. Addressing the quality of early learning for 3- and 4-year-olds is just the beginning. To create a strong foundation, children must also have effective kindergarten through third-grade experiences to sustain and build upon their pre-K experiences.

With implementation of ESSA underway, state policymakers can shine a spotlight on early learning outcomes by encouraging the inclusion of P-3 indicators in state and local report cards (e.g., kindergarten entry assessment outcomes as indicators of pre-K quality), including early learning in school improvement strategies, supporting transitions from pre-K to kindergarten, and supporting targeted professional development for P-3 teachers. SPREE members encourage states to experiment with new ideas, revise and reattempt unsuccessful policies and programs, and systematically document and evaluate the success of these attempts. This will help to improve both the access to and efficacy of programs addressing the unique needs of their states.

### We Know What Works<sup>18</sup>

#### Creating high quality P-3 programs

- Prioritize quality and continuous improvement.
- Invest in training and coaching for teachers.
- Coordinate the administration of birth-through-grade-three programs.
- Strategically combine multiple stable funding sources to increase access and improve equity.
- Create broad-based coalitions and support.

## FOCUS ON CURRICULUM, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, COACHING, AND ORGANIZED AND ENGAGED CLASSROOMS

Upon reviewing hundreds of educational research studies on the effects of early learning programs, leading researchers recently found that three elements were critical for effectiveness: a well-implemented, evidence-based curriculum; coaching for teachers; and orderly and active classrooms.<sup>19</sup> State lawmakers can enable district leaders to select, implement and evaluate the curricula that both meet their local needs and also produce results. Targeted and well-implemented professional development and teacher coaching have been proven to be invaluable for effective curricular implementation.<sup>20</sup> Legislators can require coaching, mentoring and/or professional learning communities to meet this need. Lastly, an engaging yet orderly classroom that employs developmentally appropriate tasks is the hallmark of an effective early learning educator. To support this effort, legislators can require developmentally appropriate classroom management strategies to be taught in educator preparation programs and required for licensure.

## DEVELOP CONSTRAINED AND UNCONSTRAINED SKILLS

P-3 classrooms with effective teachers who can modify instruction to meet all students' learning needs and provide engaging tasks are more likely to foster higher-order skills, increasingly known as unconstrained skills. These skills, which include receptive and expressive vocabulary, or effective problem-solving are subject to continuous development.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, identifying letters and basic counting are known as constrained skills, as there is a limit to their development. Developing both sets of skills is critical, as constrained skills are foundational and prerequisite to developing unconstrained skills. Unconstrained skills become increasingly important as students progress through their educational careers (i.e., reading to learn, instead of learning to read).

## JUSTIFY FUNDING LEVELS

Across the country, state budgets are becoming increasingly tight and focused on providing the most essential services. As pre-K falls outside of the K-12 funding formula in most states, lawmakers look for cost-effective and proven strategies to develop policy and guide funding decisions. To meet the needs of early learners, states might consider a more flexible funding approach that meets the needs of those in pre-K, as well as kindergarteners through third-graders, one that combines these funding streams from various local, state and federal sources for a focus on early learners. This may mean leveraging additional funds and innovative solutions for vulnerable populations, such as students living in poverty, rural families and DLLs (and their overlaps). Moreover, it is important to provide targeted supports to schools with high percentages of these groups, as their cumulative effects can be detrimental to students' educational outcomes.

### STATE EXAMPLES

- **Alabama:** Created a "Pre Through 3" Initiative to ensure that all students are well prepared for and reading at grade level by the end of third grade. The initiative employs a three-pronged approach by focusing on leadership, instruction and assessment, and is part of a larger vision focusing on early childhood education, computer science in middle and high school, and workforce preparedness.
- **Arizona Senate Bill 1131 (2017):** Amends uses of the kindergarten through third-grade reading support level weight to provide implementation guidance for school districts and charter schools to improve instruction and reading proficiency for kindergarten through grade-three students. Also requires accountability reporting of program outcomes.
- **Colorado Senate Bill 103 (2017):** Uses early learning (P-3) as a core strategy to provide a systemic and equitable approach for school turnaround. Primarily, this bill targets schools designated for improvement to conduct needs assessments of the early learning options (and quality) available to students living in the targeted school's neighborhood and determine enrollment gaps. It also directs the district and school to work with an early childhood council or early childhood community agencies to reach all students, focus on transitions from pre-K to kindergarten, help kindergarten through third-grade teachers acquire early childhood teaching credentials, encourage teacher collaboration and professional development, engage parents and offer other resources, including home visiting and early intervention services.

# Principle Three: Governance

## STRATEGIES

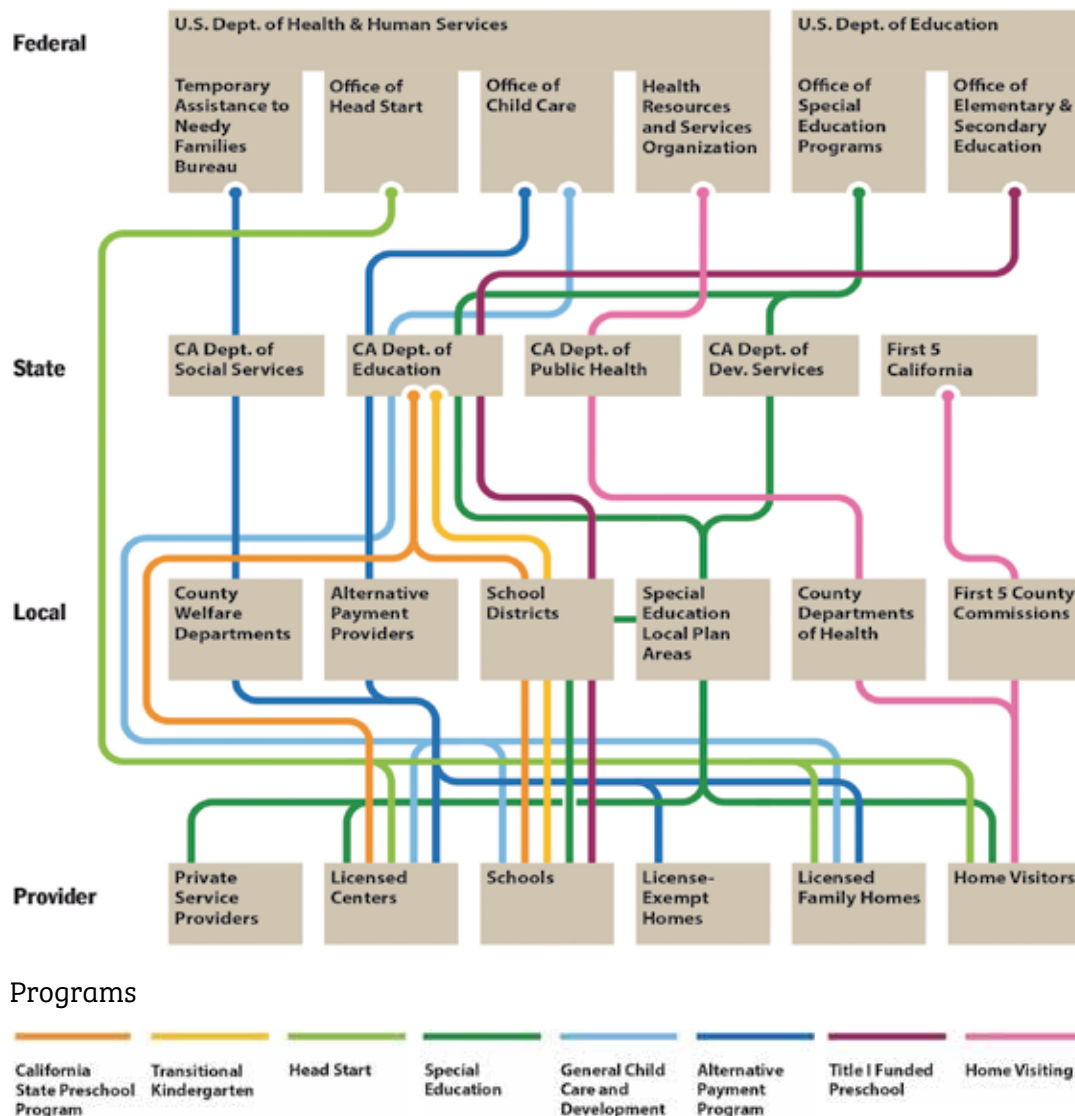
- Choose an appropriate governance structure.
- Decide between universal, targeted or a hybrid model.

Determining which agency or organization leads early learning in a state can be a challenge. States can think about how best to structure governance to enhance their ability to combine overlapping areas of governance and funding streams. Early learning councils or coordinating bodies that encompass the birth through age 8 spectrum allow states to provide coordinated support at the earliest and most critical stages to align with and supplement existing K-12 structures.

### CHOOSE AN APPROPRIATE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

Governance structures vary state to state and are generally very complex. California's governance struc-

### Governance Structures of California Birth-Age 5 Programs<sup>22</sup>



Source: California Department of Education

ture for pre-K programs demonstrates the complexity and challenges facing state and local agencies. Each has differing regulations and reporting requirements.

According to the BUILD Initiative, a national leader in effective early learning systems building, “an effective model of governance should create coherence among policies and services ... and promote efficiency, excellence and equity.”<sup>23</sup> Governance values should also reflect coordination, alignment, sustainability, efficiency and accountability. Developing coordinating councils such as North Carolina’s Birth-3rd Grade Interagency Council is one option. Policymakers can design their governance structures intentionally and frequently revisit them to ensure that they are, in fact, delivering on their intentions and goals.

At the federal level, the Head Start Act [Section 642 B(b)(1)(A)(i)] requires the governor of each state to designate or establish a council to serve as the State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care for children from birth to school entry. The responsibility of this council is to lead the development or enhancement of a high-quality, comprehensive system of early learning that ensures statewide coordination and collaboration among the wide range of early childhood programs and services in the state. To begin improving early learning governance structures, policymakers can look to their state council.

### **DECIDE BETWEEN UNIVERSAL, TARGETED OR A HYBRID MODEL**

Multiple agencies can govern pre-K and decide whether they will provide a universal or targeted programming. The decision to make pre-K universal for students across a state or targeted toward specific groups of children is dependent upon several factors, including funding, political and public support, and need. Pre-K investments appear to be especially beneficial for children from traditionally underserved backgrounds, but research also suggests that these students benefit most when they are enrolled in universal programs with their upper- and middle-class peers.<sup>24,25</sup>

States should also consider children living in rural areas, as their pre-K access lags behind all urban and suburban student groups.<sup>26</sup> This highlights the need for cost-effective school readiness models that are unhindered by challenges of geography or transportation. One approach that states may consider is targeted school readiness programs using evidence-based digital technologies to reach at-risk populations in remote areas, such as Utah’s UPSTART Program (See State Examples, page 7). This strategy has been proven to support significant gains in school readiness with long-term effects, offering a cost-effective alternative to site-based programs.<sup>27</sup>

States do not necessarily need to settle on one approach—universal or targeted. Providing targeted programs that universally enroll low-income children is a potential hybrid model. SPREE members want to reiterate that the *equitable* distribution of access to high-quality pre-K based on need may be more important than *equal* distribution, mirroring international education leaders.

### **STATE EXAMPLES**

- **North Carolina Senate Bill 257 (2017):** Establishes the Birth-3rd Grade Interagency Council. This council is comprised of members from the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Public Instruction. It serves to facilitate the development and implementation of a coordinated system of early care and education and child development services with a focus on meeting the developmental and educational needs of all children from birth through age 8.
- **Washington House Bill 1661 (2017):** Creates the Department of Children, Youth and Families to improve service delivery and outcomes. Existing services must be restructured into a comprehensive agency dedicated to the safety, development and well-being of children that emphasizes prevention, early childhood development and early intervention, and supporting parents to be their children’s first and most important teachers.

# Principle Four: Community and Family Engagement

## STRATEGIES

- Consider two-generation strategies.
- Use the community school model as a one-stop shop.
- Identify out-of-school opportunities.

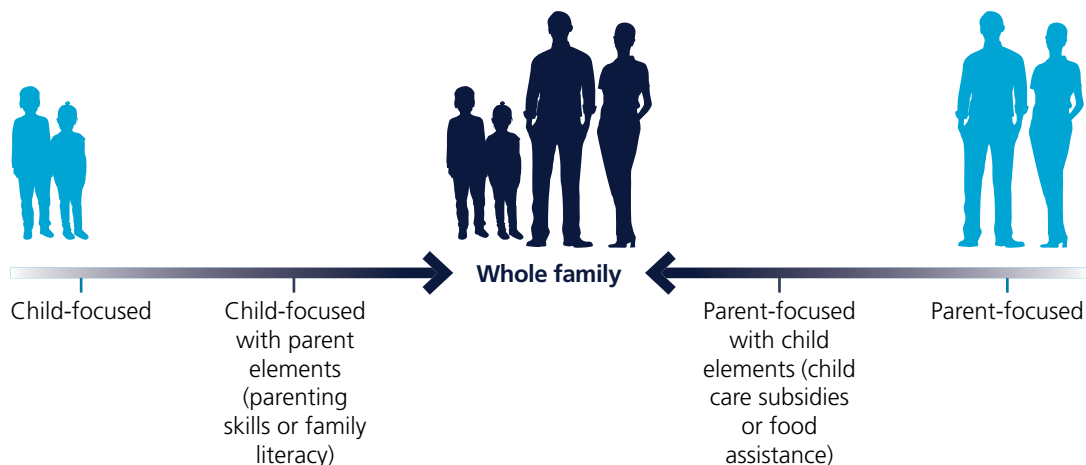
Parents and family members are a child's first teachers. As children enter early learning settings, research shows that parents and families who engage in their children's education improve school readiness outcomes, both academic and behavioral, including improving motivation, impulse control, attention, memory and planning skills. Such engagement also reduces behavioral problems.<sup>28</sup>

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University offers three principles for policymakers to consider in helping families with young children thrive: supporting responsive relationships, strengthening core life skills and reducing sources of stress.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, it is critical for parent-teacher partnerships to be authentic, as reflected in the process and outcomes in which families and schools are focused. The strategies below are potential means to do so.

## CONSIDER TWO-GENERATION STRATEGIES

Two-generation strategies (2-Gen) aim to eradicate intergenerational poverty by simultaneously targeting early childhood education and providing economic and educational services to parents. As an example, in rural St. Clair County, Alabama, a partnership between the local Head Start organization and Jefferson State Community College provides low-income single mothers with technical training at the Head Start center to become pharmacy technicians while their children attend educational programs. In interviews with teachers, program evaluators found evidence of improved attendance for the children and increased motivation for both mother and child. Evaluators also discovered a strong informal social network between mothers that led to a 100 percent completion rate of the pharmacy technician training program.<sup>30</sup> Evidence-based home visiting programs for parents of young children and family engagement programs also support this 2-Gen approach.<sup>31</sup>

## The Two-Generation (2-Gen) Continuum<sup>32</sup>



## COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AS A ONE-STOP SHOP

Community schools provide comprehensive services such as health screening, parenting education, job training and English classes at the school site. These schools are designed to provide a comprehensive selection of wraparound resources and services to children and families to improve social mobility and can serve to support both children and parents. Researchers found that well-implemented community schools can be beneficial as a targeted and comprehensive intervention in high-poverty schools.<sup>33</sup>

## IDENTIFY OUT-OF-SCHOOL OPPORTUNITIES

Research has shown that children from low-income families trail their more affluent peers by an average of 6,000 hours of learning outside of school; this includes after-school activities, summer camps and family reading time.<sup>34</sup> One method for addressing these gaps is to focus on programs addressing school readiness in the home to actively engage parents.

Some states, like Indiana and South Carolina, are modeling Utah's UPSTART program, piloting new programs that blend robust parental support with virtual technologies for early childhood learning. These programs use both in-person and remote strategies to train parents to become more effective first teachers, learning to increase cognitive stimulation as they interact with their children and to gradually provide more complex activities to integrate foundational learning skills. Research shows that this type of early learning success helps establish lifelong attitudes for children and their families about learning and literacy and builds future learning resilience and persistence that is particularly powerful for low-income families.<sup>35</sup>

### STATE EXAMPLES

- **New Mexico House Bill 477 (2017):** Requires community school initiatives to include an independently evaluated, evidence-based model designed to improve academic outcomes.
- **Indiana House Bill 1004 (2017):** Establishes a technology-based, pre-K pilot program designed to improve a child's transition into elementary education; includes a parental engagement and involvement component; is provided at the child's home or a similar home setting; and meets design parameters for inclusion in a longitudinal study.
- **Texas Senate Bill 1404 (2017):** Requires that each school district and open-enrollment charter school report through the Public Education Information Management Systems information for each campus of the district or school regarding the availability of expanded learning opportunities (ELOs) and the number of students participating in each of the ELO categories.

# Principle Five: Educator Development

## STRATEGIES

- Develop an early childhood credential or certification.
- Professionalize the P-3 workforce.
- Rethink assessment and intervention.

Strong teaching is a common element found among all international educational leaders. According to NCSL's International Study Group: "A world-class teaching profession supports a world-class instructional system, where every student has access to highly effective teachers and is expected to succeed."<sup>36</sup> Specific elements include rigorous preparation and licensure, thorough induction, career ladders and lattices, a professional work environment and retention. The following are three specific strategies to improve the P-3 educator workforce.

### DEVELOP AN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CREDENTIAL OR CERTIFICATION

Research has demonstrated that teachers with specialized education backgrounds, specifically in child development and instruction, have generally produced enhanced outcomes for their students.<sup>37</sup> Developing an early childhood education credential or certification for teachers and principals and providing consistent targeted professional development and/or professional learning communities and coaching are concrete steps to ensure educators are equipped with the skills and understanding they need to ensure that their students succeed. The National Association for the Education of Young Children is leading an initiative entitled Power to the Profession aimed to "define the early childhood profession by establishing a unifying framework for career pathways, knowledge, and competencies, qualifications, standards and compensation."<sup>38</sup>

### PROFESSIONALIZE THE P-3 WORKFORCE

International education leaders prioritize alignment between teacher compensation, education levels and performance imperatives. Additionally, international leaders, such as Singapore, label their educators as "nation builders" and hold them in the same regard as other well-respected professionals.<sup>39</sup> Raising pay and providing professional development opportunities, enhancing options for completing graduate degrees and focusing on retention are examples of specific methods to create, develop and retain a professional workforce.

However, the majority of states do not have policies supporting compensation parity for the early learning workforce, especially for pre-K teachers and center directors. In the states that do have these policies, they largely only apply to lead teachers working in public school settings. Of 24 of 57 state pre-K programs that reported on the average lead teacher salary, on average, pre-K teachers in public settings earned \$44,651 in 2014-2015 and pre-K teachers in nonpublic settings earned \$32,897. These salaries are consistently lower than the average salary for public school elementary teachers, typically by \$10,000 to \$30,000.<sup>40</sup>

Principals and other school leaders are second only to teachers as the most influential factor in student outcomes.<sup>41</sup> Research demonstrates that P-3 student achievement improves when principals have training or professional development in early childhood development. Lastly, most states' principal preparation programs could better equip elementary school principals to more effectively support the K-three grades, leading to principals more effectively evaluating teachers, supporting instruction, and implementing curricula and assessments.<sup>42</sup> While leaders in preschool settings may more closely resemble "directors" responsible for the business and staffing needs, a leader in this setting may require the capacities more closely resembling a principal in an elementary school setting.

### RETHINK ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION

SPREE members believe selecting and implementing assessments should be purposeful and done with care; performance-based formative assessments throughout P-3 should be prioritized while transitioning gradually to summative testing typically seen in third grade. Targeted and in-depth training in assessment



for teachers is essential, not only in administering assessments, but in how the results are used to inform instruction. Assessments should also be developmentally appropriate, valid and culturally sensitive to effectively reach students from varying cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Adaptive assessment technologies can be incorporated when appropriate to personalize assessment and intervention. Early identification and warning systems are important, along with comprehensive approaches to ensuring that no students fall through the cracks.

## STATE EXAMPLES

■ **Connecticut House Bill 7254 (2017):** Requires all recipients of an integrated early childhood and special education endorsement to have completed a program in the diagnosis and remediation of reading and language arts.

■ **Maryland Senate Bill 677 (2015):** Requires the Maryland State Department of Education and institutions of higher education that offer early childhood education programs to develop a master plan to address the critical shortage of qualified professional teachers and child care providers in the early childhood education workforce.

■ **Oregon Senate Bill 182 (2017):** Establishes the Educator Advancement Council and directs the Early Learning Division of the state department of education to establish and implement policies and practices related to comprehensive early childhood professional development systems. These include incorporating improved coaching, recruitment, preparation, induction, career advancement opportunities, and support for early learning providers and professionals.

■ **Texas House Bill 2039 (2017):** Creates an early childhood certification to teach students in pre-K through grade three, ensures that there are teachers with special training in early childhood education focusing on pre-K through grade three, and requires the establishment of an early childhood certificate.

■ **Virginia House Bill 46 (2016):** Directs the state secretary of education to establish the school readiness committee to address the development and alignment of an effective professional development and credentialing system. This system will include a competency-based professional development pathway for practitioners, consideration of articulation agreements between associate and baccalaureate degree programs, review of teacher licensure programs and alignment of funding streams.



## Conclusion

There are myriad reasons for states to closely examine and consider highly effective early learning programs: improving equity, closing opportunity and achievement gaps, and effectively developing the future workforce. The persuasiveness of particular reasons will depend on states' political contexts. Some policymakers may seek policy solutions to the challenge of getting parents—particularly single parents—into stable employment. They may be interested in evidence showing that pre-K programs increase parental employment rates and developing two-generation programs. Other policymakers may seek ways to reduce prison populations and increase the skills of their states' future workforce. They may be interested in studies on the long-term benefits of pre-K. Still others may be interested in finding ways to increase the wages and career prospects of early educators working in informal, private settings. They may be interested in examples of communities that have improved and expanded mixed delivery pre-K systems through public investments.

It is the hope of SPREE members that this report will prove a useful tool for state policymakers and legislative staff to coalesce around the research findings and begin to systemically improve their P-3 systems. The SPREE Framework is a guide to begin this process. Strategies presented within each principle are research-based and were deliberated and prioritized by SPREE members. These strategies are further supported by the policy examples from across the country. With innovation, tenacity and a systemic approach, these strategies and policies are a means to reducing and eventually eliminating opportunity gaps and ensuring that every child is at the starting line of building a strong educational foundation and positive life trajectory.

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