



OFFICIAL POLICY

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) supports early childhood education and its benefits, especially in lessening the developmental deficiencies of childhood poverty. Studies dramatically demonstrate that participation in preschool programs can increase the percentages of young adults who are literate, employed, and enrolled in postsecondary education. Early childhood education can also reduce the number of youths who drop out of school, are incarcerated, become pregnant and use welfare. In the short-term, evidence shows that, for those at-risk, these programs can help improve children's intellectual and social performance in school and ultimately can help children achieve greater school success and possibly greater socioeconomic success and social responsibility.

NCSL recognizes that the success of such programs is contingent on the establishment and application of clear, challenging standards for curricula and assessments, on the selection of appropriately trained teachers, on adequate facilities, appropriate teacher-to-student ratios, and active parent involvement. Such programs are relatively expensive, but show promise of a high return on investment.

To establish such programs on a broader basis than is currently available through Head Start or other state and locally initiated programs may require an enhanced partnership with the federal government.

NCSL's current policy, "Improving Opportunities for Early Learning," expands this partnership to include a pool of federal funds for early learning programs that is flexible enough to meet local needs and would allow states to supplement existing programs. Such a partnership is in keeping with established policy that good education is in the national interest, but primarily a state responsibility and a local function. NCSL also would emphasize that any state-federal partnership in this area would primarily be for the expansion of service to low-income children, not the alteration of existing programs.



If the federal government expands its involvement in prekindergarten education, these are the tenets on which such an effort should be built:

1. Preservation of state flexibility, including maintaining the states' authority to determine how the program is administered, evaluated and what population is served;
2. Promotion of early learning;
3. Requirement for federal funding to meet the expectation of the state;
4. Preservation of state authority in these matters and
5. Avoidance of unfunded mandates.

Head Start

The federally supported Head Start program has been successful, despite only being funded to serve three out of five of the eligible children. With the numbers of children in poverty increasing and the need for more child development/child care services for low-income families increasing, it is essential that Head Start be fully-funded to assure school readiness for all eligible children. NCSL urges federal policymakers to consider the importance of greater coordination among Head Start, early childhood and child care programs and elementary schools to improve educational opportunities for disadvantaged populations. It should be emphasized that parental involvement, which benefits both parents and children, is the critical component of Head Start.

NCSL commends the Congress on its legislative activity in recent years that allows states more program choice and fewer mandates in early education. NCSL would expect that any proposed legislation in early childhood education would do the same. States should be able to establish a flexible plan of action within federal parameters and to designate how the program will be operated and administered in keeping with state laws. Since state legislatures have ultimate responsibility for the establishment of state education policies and appropriation of state education funds, any new funding option should be part of state appropriations processes. A state coordinating or advisory body required by federal statute must include, at a minimum, a representative of each chamber of the state legislature selected by the presiding officer.

Better coordination between Head Start, prekindergarten, and child care providers would strengthen the quality of early childhood education. Such coordination is the responsibility of the state, which can best define and determine its needs. NCSL's child care policy further details this coordination.



NCSL supports a state option to have more control over Head Start and the authority to coordinate Head Start with other state early childhood education efforts. NCSL welcomes a more complete discussion about such an option, and notes that the following issues must be addressed in such a proposal:

- There should be language in the proposal describing and limiting the expenditures that are part of an MOE requirement, and child care expenditures should not be included;
- Head Start teachers in a state controlled program should meet state, not federal certifications;
- State policy processes must govern the approval of a decision to participate or not participate;
- Funds for a Head Start program run under this option must be integrated into the state budgeting process and appropriated by state legislators;
- States must be able to set accountability measures and performance expectations; and
- States must be able to determine which state agency will administer the program.

Family Support and Parenting

NCSL further recognizes that we cannot continue to treat family conditions as a matter separate from education and that such a focus is particularly important for younger children. Staff development and training is critical for quality Head Start programs. Funds should be allocated for training staff and enriching program curricula. Programs to support parents and family members as the first teachers of their children should be promoted and strengthened in both public and private sectors.

Expires August 2009