



To: David Kirp, Joan Lombardi, and Ann O’Leary

From: Sara Mead, New America Foundation

e-mail: mead@newamerica.net

phone: (202/986-2700) cell: (202/253-4660)

Re: Early Education in the Obama Administration

The New America Foundation is excited by the president-elect’s stated commitment to expand federal investments in early education programs. We believe it is essential, however, that these new investments be integrated with the administration’s larger vision for improving public education in the United States and narrowing achievement gaps for low-income and minority youth. Federal education policy has historically treated early childhood (birth to 5) and K-12 education as entirely separate policy spheres. But this distinction is artificial and runs counter to what we know about children’s development. Breaking down the artificial wall between birth-to-5 and K-12 education must be a central component of this administration’s vision for young children.

This framing of early education is essential for several reasons. Polling data suggests that the public is more supportive of early education investments when they are framed as education issues, rather than childcare or work support issues. To maximize long-term payoff, early education investments must be the first step in a seamless continuum of high-quality learning that begins in the early years and continues throughout children’s experiences in the P-12 or P-16 system. Even as we work to improve the quality of children’s early childhood experience, research shows that existing elementary school programs often fall short of the quality we seek to ensure. Research by Pianta and colleagues finds that less than 10 percent of elementary school students are consistently enrolled in classrooms that offer high-quality instructional and emotional support across 1st, 3rd, and 5th grade.¹ Failure to link early education investments with complementary improvements in the K-12 system—especially the K-3 years—will undermine the long-term impact of early education.

Concrete Measures to Better Integrate Early Childhood and Education Reform Policies

There is understandable excitement about the potential to move new investments in early education through a stimulus package, appropriations process, and potential free-standing early education legislation. We believe that moving early on free-standing early education legislation could provide a valuable opportunity for the administration to achieve an early “win” on education issues that could strengthen your position going into ESEA reauthorization. But ESEA remains the cornerstone of the federal role in PK-12 education policy, and numerous provisions of the current NCLB law directly or indirectly impact early education, or provide opportunities for new legislation to do so. Here are several ways in which we would like to see the next ESEA reauthorization work to bridge the divide between early childhood and K-12 federal education policies:

Standards: Since the 1994 IASA legislation, standards have been a cornerstone of the federal approach to reforming education policy. The next ESEA reauthorization is unlikely to



fundamentally deviate from the standards framework, although numerous proposals to adjust existing standards—through college-ready standards, movements towards national standards, and so forth—are already in the mix. As research by the American Federation of Teachers has demonstrated, early elementary (K-3) standards are an area of particular weakness in existing state standards.² These standards are rarely aligned with the early learning standards that states have established for pre-k or birth-to-5 programs. Any effort to improve the quality of state standards in the next ESEA reauthorization must include requirements that states set high-quality, comprehensive, and grade-specific standards for the early grades, and that they ensure that early learning and K-3 standards are aligned.

Teacher Quality: Other than money, human capital is the major obstacle to expanding access to high-quality early childhood education. The 2008 HEA reauthorization took important steps to improve education for early childhood educators and integrate early childhood educators into that law's Title II teacher quality programs. The next ESEA reauthorization must do the same within ESEA's **Title II** teacher quality programs. In addition, the federal government should invest in the development of innovative models of streamlined, high-quality alternative routes to early educator credentialing, through either the **Transition to Teaching** program or a new program in ESEA.

Intervention in chronically low-performing schools and the neighborhoods they serve: NCLB's current menu of intervention responses for chronically low-performing schools is flawed. Redesigning that menu to support effective strategies to improve the most troubled schools will be a critical ESEA reauthorization challenge. We believe that effective approaches to improve these schools must reach beyond schools alone to the communities they serve and support children's learning in their early years before school entry. An accompanying New America paper outlines some of the possibilities for such interventions.

Accountability for classroom quality: By necessity, the early education field is far ahead of the K-12 field in moving beyond test scores to the use of a variety of validated, reliable assessments (such as the CLASS) to measure the quality of children's actual experiences in classrooms. These tools have tremendous potential to improve both early childhood and K-12 education and bridge some contentious K-12 reform debates (such as those over the use of test scores to measure teacher quality). The next ESEA should support the expansion of the use of such classroom quality measures at both the 0-5 and K-12 levels.

Charter Schools: President-elect Obama has pledged to double funding for public charter schools. As public schools operated by independent, often community-based organizations outside the existing district system, charter schools are potentially valuable tools for expanding the supply of high-quality early education programs. Yet a variety of federal, state, and local policy obstacles prevent charter schools from reaching their potential to support quality early education. Promised increases in charter school funding must be paired with policy changes to the existing federal charter school program that support quality and accountability in charter schooling, remove federal obstacles to charters as early education providers, and create incentives for states to remove policy obstacles to charters as early education providers. An accompanying paper explains these ideas in greater detail.



School Modernization: There is a strong push to incorporate funding for school construction into a stimulus package. Because lack of access to adequate facilities is an obstacle to expansion of quality early education programs, federal funding for school construction/renovation could significantly benefit early education programs. It is critical, however, to ensure that any such program does not restrict access to school districts but allows community-based early education providers to access funds for renovation and expansion. The 2001 School Renovation Grants program, which required that states enable private, non-profit schools serving low-income students to participate in the program on an equitable basis with public schools, provides a precedent for this.

Creating a “Home” for Early Education in the Department of Education

The transition team is admirably cognizant of the need to better coordinate early education programs across various agencies that operate them. Yet for such coordination to be effective, there needs to be a point person within the Department of Education for other agencies to coordinate with. The Department of Education currently does not have a “home” for early education—programs are scattered across various offices, with the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services operating the IDEA Preschool and Part C programs; Office of Elementary and Secondary Education operating the Early Reading First, Even Start, and Title I programs; and Office of Postsecondary Education overseeing the HEA Title II and Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMP) programs. As a result there is a lack of coordination around early education within the Department itself, and there is no high-level voice for early education within the Department.

One option for creating such a point person is to appoint a senior advisor to the secretary for early education, who could serve in the role that Ellen Frede has argued is needed at the federal level. The success of that approach would depend almost entirely on the stature and skills of the person selected and his/her relationship with the secretary. Another approach would be to create a new office for early education within the department—similar to the way the Bush administration created the Office of Innovation and Improvement (OII) or the Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools (note: this did not require legislation or confirmation of individuals heading these offices). Such an office could take over operation of some smaller early education programs (such as CCAMP), raise the standing of early education in the Department, and provide a platform for addressing early education issues (as OII indeed has on school choice and teacher performance pay). OII has had its failings, but it has been successfully raised the profile of issues under its purview.

The Need for Strong, Executive-Level Leadership

In order to bridge the divide between federal early childhood and K-12 policies, better coordination between the Department of Education, HHS, and other agencies operating early education programs is essential. The proposed Presidential Early Learning Council has potential to help improve coordination, but the track record of such coordinating councils is very much mixed. One lesson that emerges from states’ experiences in trying to combine resources from different programs and agencies to support pre-k quality and expansion is that executive level leadership is essential. States have been most effective when there has been a strong point person



in the governor's office working to make sure things happen. This argues for the need for a strong early education point person within the White House to oversee any early education expansion or coordination activities.

Additional Resources (accompanying this document)

10 New Ideas for Early Education in the NCLB Reauthorization

http://www.newamerica.net/publications/policy/10_new_ideas_early_education_nclb_reauthorization

Charter Schools, An Important Partner Supporting Quality Pre-K

<http://www.newamerica.net/blog/early-ed-watch/2008/charter-schools-important-partner-supporting-quality-pre-k-3100>

Should Pre-K Be Part of the Stimulus Package?

<http://www.newamerica.net/blog/early-ed-watch/2008/should-preschool-be-part-stimulus-package-8617>

Changing the Game: The Federal Role in Supporting 21st Century Education Innovation

http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2008/1016_education_mead_rotherham.aspx



¹ Pianta, Belsky, Houts and Morrison, “Opportunities to Learn in America’s Elementary Classrooms,” *Science* 315, 1795 (2007) <http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/data/315/5820/1795/DC1/1>

² Sizing Up State Standards 2008. (Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Teachers. 2008)
<http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/standards2008.pdf>