



## **BUILDING BLOCKS FOR EARLY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT: ENCOURAGING STATE INVESTMENTS FOR AT-RISK CHILDREN**

**Rationale:** During the first 36 months of life, the brain undergoes its most dramatic development. Children acquire the ability to think, speak, learn, and reason in these earliest years. They also form attachments with primary caregivers that significantly influence their future development and functioning. Families are the center of a young child's healthy growth and development, but families cannot do it alone. Too many young children live in families facing economic and social stresses, including lack of access to health care, which place them at risk developmentally.

At the same time, millions of families rely on child care and other early childhood services while they work. Children spend their days in a variety of settings, including child care, Head Start and Early Head Start, and preschool. More important than the label we put on these settings is the profound influence that each has on a child's development. In order to produce long-term benefits to children and society more broadly, all of these programs and services must strive to be of the highest quality.

The most vulnerable children need the most comprehensive, high-quality services, but federal and state programs are not meeting their needs. Less than three percent of eligible babies and toddlers now receive Early Head Start. Fewer than half of eligible Head Start preschoolers are able to enroll in that program. Only one in seven eligible children receive child care assistance.

Children develop cognitive, social-emotional, and physical capacities over time, building new and more complex skills upon earlier foundations. Yet, services for young children, are typically provided in a fragmented fashion, focusing on preschoolers in isolation of infants and toddlers. In addition, Inadequate attention is not is paid to other supports and services needed to help all young children and their families succeed. As a result, many preschoolers with the greatest risk of developmental difficulties and lack of school preparedness play "catch-up" instead of building the foundation for learning early in life. In contrast, the research on Early Head Start shows the efficacy of a high-quality, birth-to-five approach: The program is making a positive difference for infants and toddlers in areas associated with children's success in school, family self-sufficiency, and parental support of child development. Follow-up research shows that positive impacts persist as the children enter kindergarten. Children who attended both Early Head Start and pre-kindergarten experience the most positive outcomes.

In order to offer young children the best start in life, we must ensure that states have the resources to increase access to high-quality services for young children while also integrating those policies and services into one seamless approach for children birth-to-five. A new funding stream would encourage state investment in expanding the supply of early childhood education programs that meet and can sustain high-quality standards such as those of Early Head Start and Head Start. Expanding at-risk children's access to the more intensive services can help prepare them for success in school. A system of high-quality services that includes very young children must also ensure support for parents and a wide range of choices as they take on the challenging task of raising children. Such a system must include the full range of child care settings in which young children spend significant time, developed in ways that meet community needs. Services must be implemented based on research and evidence on supports that lead to children's healthy development.

The federal government must show leadership by supporting states in developing and delivering a birth-to-five system to meet the needs of young children, their families and their communities. Congress recognized the need for a broader system by establishing State Advisory Councils for Early Childhood Education and Care in the Head Start reauthorization bill. These Councils are responsible for conducting state needs assessments for early childhood development programs from birth to school as well as making recommendations for strengthening collaboration and coordination among these services. To fill the gaps with quality early childhood development and learning programs, we need to build on the foundation of federal child care, Early Head Start and Head Start programs, providing additional incentives for states to invest in high-quality programs for young children. We must pay particular attention to infants and toddlers to ensure that the learning gap does not become unnecessarily wide before they reach preschool.



## Summary of Building Blocks for Early Learning and Development Act

To enhance the capacity of the states to ensure a robust birth-to-school entry system, this Act creates a dedicated federal funding stream to help states to expand high-quality, comprehensive early childhood programs, to build the supply of programs that meet high-quality standards and meet community needs, and to support parents and give them a wide range of choices for assistance in their children's early development and learning. Highest priority must be given to serving families and children at the greatest risk for poor development and lack of readiness for school. These children spend their days in a variety of settings including child care, Head Start and Early Head Start and preschool. In order to produce long-term benefits to children and society more broadly, all of these programs and services must strive to be of the highest quality.

### Purposes

- Increase the availability of, and access to, high quality comprehensive early learning and development services and settings for at-risk infants and toddlers, young children, and their families. These services should begin prenatally and be based on research and evidence about supports that lead to children's healthy development and learning across all domains;
- Help states to build comprehensive, full-day and full-year programs for infants, toddlers, and young children. Create a birth-to-five system that recognizes the need to support child development from the earliest years, ensuring that children enter school ready to learn and supporting families and parents in their children's positive development; and
- Encourage the creation of mechanisms for significant investment in the earliest years of children's lives through a partnership of federal, state, local government and private sector funding.

### State governance

The Governor of each State will designate an entity with the capacity to provide leadership, implement programs and services, and, at State option, establish a public-private partnership, to create or enhance the building block components of a birth-to-five early childhood system of high-quality early childhood education programs.

### State Requirements for Receiving a Grant

- States must submit a plan that identifies the use of these grant funds based on the state needs assessment and plan developed by the State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care authorized in the Head Start reauthorization (P.L. 110-134)
- The state plan must demonstrate (1) how the funds will be used to expand access to programs that provide high-quality comprehensive early learning and child development services, including home visitation services, that meet or exceed the performance standards for Head Start/Early Head Start and (2) how funds will be used to help child care programs and other early childhood education settings move toward achieving such standards and provide full-day/full-year services for children.
- States must articulate a plan for increasing access for underserved birth-to-five populations such as low-income and at-risk children, children with special needs, and English language learners, with particular attention to infants and toddlers.
- States must target services funded to geographic areas in which at least 50 percent of the children residing in the area meet the criteria for free or reduced price meals under the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act.
- States must provide matching funds that are not less than 10 percent of the total program cost in the first year, 12 percent in the second year, 15 percent in the third year, 18 percent in the fourth year, and 20 percent in the fifth year.
- States must use funds provided under this Act to supplement and not supplant other Federal, State, local or private funds that are expended for early childhood learning and development services and must maintain the expenditures for an array of early childhood programs, including CCDBG, Head Start, TANF, and IDEA.



### **Early Learning Challenge Grants to States for Building Blocks**

States receiving a grant will be required to create and implement a vision for increasing the availability of and access to high-quality, comprehensive early learning and development services for at-risk infants, toddlers, and young children. States must demonstrate how they are moving toward a true birth-to-five system by focusing on services for infants and toddlers who are often overlooked, identifying gaps and ways to expand and improve services, and creating the building blocks to support early learning and development.

Funds provided by this Act will be used to improve the quality of early care and education for children ages birth to five in the spectrum of settings, both in-home and out-of-home, in which they receive care. This goal will be met by assisting early care and education providers in serving additional children in programs that already meet Head Start and Early Head Start performance standards and helping programs to attain equivalent standards. Priority will be given to increasing access to high-quality programs for underserved populations including low-income and at-risk children, infants, toddlers, children with special needs, and English language learners.

Funds must be used for at least two of the following Building Blocks. In designing their Building Blocks activities, States should emphasize creating a continuum of services from birth to age five, beginning prenatally, and services that are full-day and full-year.

- A) Supporting parents and other caregivers in promoting the healthy development of their infants, toddlers and young children, beginning prenatally, including parenting information, parent education, family literacy, and family support services, delivered through mechanisms including home visitation, neighborhood-based centers, child care centers and family child care homes, and perinatal hospital-based programs;
- B) Expanding access to existing high-quality early care and education programs by establishing or expanding programs that provide comprehensive early learning and child development services to pregnant women, infants and toddlers, three- and four-year olds and their families, that meet or exceed the standards for Head Start and Early Head Start described in Section 641A(1)(a) of the Head Start Act.
- C) Improving the quality of existing early care and education programs by:
  - 1) providing funds and training and technical assistance to enable existing programs, including programs serving infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children, to take steps toward meeting Head Start and Early Head Start performance standards; and
  - 2) establishing networks of specialists in infant-toddler development to provide training and intensive consultation to individual programs and practitioners, establishing model programs and providing training and technical assistance;
- D) Providing professional development assistance
  - 1) directly tied to an early childhood education credential or degree; and
  - 2) tied to compensation systems and financial assistance for attainment of higher credentials and education in early childhood development and education.

Ensuring a focus on infants and toddlers: A State shall use at least 50 percent of its grant on infants and toddlers (children younger than three). Services for infants and toddlers may include but not be limited to services provided in the home.

Limitation: No more than 25 percent of a grant can be used by a State to fund activities related to state funded preschool programs.

### **Administration and Evaluation**

The Secretary may use an amount not to exceed one percent on design and implementation of evaluations for the Building Blocks program.



Each State receiving a grant may spend no more than five percent of the grant for administrative purposes and no more than five percent on monitoring programs receiving funding.

**Authorization of Appropriations**

Funds would be allocated through a formula to States based on the ratio of children in a State under the age of six from families whose income is below 200 percent of the poverty line compared with to the number of such children in all the States. A state match is required and public-private partnerships are encouraged.

**National Council on Early Childhood Development**

A National Council on Early Childhood Development shall be created for the purpose of ensuring coordination, communication and collaboration among federal programs that address the range of domains of early childhood development and learning. The Council will conduct a periodic nationwide needs assessment concerning quality and availability of early childhood learning and development programs.

The Council shall be co-chaired by the Secretaries of Health and Human Services and Education and include other cabinet secretaries, federal officials, Governors and other state leaders, and early childhood experts as the President shall deem appropriate.