

National Association for the Education of Young Children

1313 L Street NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20005-4101

202-232-8777 800-424-2460

Fax 202-328-1846

www.naeyc.org

February 2, 2015

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Committee on Health, Education,
Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education,
Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Kline
Chairman
House Committee on Education
and the Workforce
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Robert Scott
Ranking Member
House Committee on Education
and the Workforce
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairmen Alexander and Kline and Ranking Members Murray and Scott:

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is the largest membership organization working on behalf of young children. NAEYC promotes high quality learning for all children, birth through 8, by connecting practice, policy and research. Through state and local affiliates in every state, NAEYC works to ensure that all young children thrive and learn in a society dedicated to ensuring they reach their full potential.

We are pleased to see that early learning has risen as a priority issue within the conversations regarding the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and hope that this opportunity can build on earlier Congressional action designed to improve early learning, notably the historic bipartisan reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) in 2014. As part of our mission to reinforce that early learning begins at birth and continues through the early elementary years, NAEYC has developed extensive knowledge on these areas, and has a unique point of view to provide a set of recommendations for reauthorization.

We believe that the primary early learning goal of this reauthorization should be to create a continuum of learning from birth through third grade that capitalizes on all that we know about how young children become academically ready, promotes effective transitions and shared expectations among early learning and early elementary programs, and helps to better align state, local and classroom activities that support children and families.

ESEA has had a positive impact on early learning system for decades. Approximately 2.6 percent of funds have been used for children younger than the age of school entry.¹ These funds have provided quality pre-

¹ New America Foundation Federal Education Budget Project (2014). *No Child Left Behind Act - Title I Distribution Formulas*. New America Foundation, Washington, DC. (downloaded from <http://febp.newamerica.net/background-analysis/no-child-left-behind-act-title-i-distribution-formulas>)

kindergarten classrooms, early identification and assessment of learning disabilities, home visiting, professional development for community-based teachers and those within school districts, and access to a broad range of comprehensive services.² These investments have largely been through Title I, and we urge the committee to retain the flexibility of these funds.

NAEYC's recommendations for attention in the reauthorized ESEA fall into three broad areas that reflect an appropriate federal role in advancing state and local early learning programs:

1. **Build state systems:** NAEYC recommends that ESEA reauthorization support state efforts to build educational systems that align high quality, developmentally appropriate services for children, families and teachers from birth through age 8.
2. **Invest in early education:** NAEYC recommends that ESEA reauthorization include sufficient federal investments, including provisions in ESEA to provide quality services for young children and families.
3. **Ensure quality in all programs:** NAEYC recommends that ESEA reauthorization be designed to accelerate state and district efforts to incorporate early learning best practices and excellence in teaching in all programs from birth through the early elementary grades.

Build State Systems

All titles in ESEA should contribute to building a seamless system of care and education that supports alignment from birth through third grade.

Across the country, states have invested in a number of systemic reforms³ to improve the quality of early learning for children from birth through school entry. These include:

- Kindergarten Entry Assessments (KEA) to guide instruction in kindergarten and beyond,
- data systems that are aligned across the early learning and elementary education systems,
- creation and implementation of tiered quality rating systems,
- investments in the workforce, through professional development, scholarships and increased compensation tied to degree completion,
- development of early learning standards that are developmentally appropriate and aligned with Common Core or other state standards for early elementary, and
- coordinated governance of early learning programs to improve communication and alignment with K-3 programs at the local school level.

Combined, these efforts have begun to weave together what were historically disconnected or nonexistent approaches, making it easier to connect high quality early learning experiences with effective early elementary initiatives. In many states, school-based programs have not been included in efforts to align quality standards; at the same time, community-based providers have often been left out of conversations around standards alignment and kindergarten readiness assessments. The reauthorization of ESEA offers an important opportunity to provide resources and supports to all states to align these areas in order to ensure that families can choose the high quality program that best meets their needs.

Title I funds should be an explicit component of these state systems. The reauthorization should include language to strengthen connections between early learning programs at the state and district levels, including enhanced language on the importance of transitions between early childhood programs and into and across the early elementary grades, and supporting professional development for teachers and

² See, for example, Matthews, H. and Ewen, D. (2010) *FAQ: Using Title I Funds of ESEA for Early Education*. Center for Law and Social Policy, Washington, DC.

³ For more information, see, for example: *The Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge Year Two Progress Report* (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ecd/early-learning/race-to-the-top>)

community providers. Specifically, additional uses of Title I could include tiered quality rating systems that support and monitor school-based early learning programs, for states to develop early learning standards that reflect the full range of development for children from birth to third grade, and to create professional development systems tied to compensation.

Additionally, many states have made a significant investment in KEAs. When states use culturally, linguistically and developmentally appropriate assessment practices in kindergarten through third grade, it strengthens the alignment for what children should know and be able to do along their academic journey. Developmentally appropriate KEAs measure children's growth and progress and provide kindergarten teachers excellent data points to inform their instructional practice. When the KEA is part of a state system that includes appropriate standards that reflect the full range of developmental needs of children from birth to 8, the assessment can be a catalyst for teachers and parents to partner in the healthy development of children.

The ESEA reauthorization can provide critical messages to states that these efforts are important and that the state education system includes its youngest learners. Moreover, ESEA reauthorization offers an important opportunity to provide resources and supports to all states to align these areas in order to ensure that families can choose the high quality program that best meets their needs.

Invest in Early Education

ESEA reauthorization should expand early learning financing to ensure that state and locally funded programs for young children are a coordinated component of a high quality early learning system and are aligned to current federal, state and local investments to enable all families to choose among high quality affordable settings that best meet their needs.

The current system of early childhood education for children from birth through the age of school entry is significantly underfunded; access to quality programs is particularly difficult for low-income families. CCDBG, which provides subsidies to these families to make child care affordable, serves only one in six eligible families. Only 42 percent of children eligible for Head Start services are able to access programs. The Early Head Start program reaches only 4 percent of eligible infants and toddlers.⁴ According to Education Week's 2015 *Quality Counts* report, "in nearly all states, children from higher-income households are more likely to attend preschool...[o]nly 40 percent of children from low-income families attend preschool, compared with 56 percent of their more affluent peers."⁵ *Quality Counts* further points out that one in four kindergarten students is not in a full-day program.

In order to serve the large number of families who currently cannot choose an affordable, high quality provider, additional investments are needed throughout the early childhood system. The reauthorization should examine how new funding streams in ESEA can help states and local communities serve the unmet needs for high quality early learning in the most disadvantaged communities in coordination and alignment with existing programs. As the process moves forward, it will be important to look at the ways that states and districts can leverage existing and new funds in order to give all families meaningful choices in their children's early-childhood education, and ensure that school districts have the resources necessary to provide early elementary programs that include full-day kindergarten.

⁴ Schmit, S., Matthews, H., Smith, S. & Robbins, T. (2013). *Investing in Young Children: A Fact Sheet on Early Care and Education Participation, Access, and Quality*. Fact Sheet. New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty; Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy.

⁵ *Preparing to Launch: Early Childhood's Academic Countdown* (2015). Education Week.

Ensure Quality in all Programs

ESEA should help local school districts adopt a continuum of developmentally appropriate standards, curricula and instructional assessments, to support teaching and learning of all children from birth through third grade. The law should ensure that states and local school districts create professional development and preparation systems that build the specialized knowledge and skills needed to promote children's success into the early elementary years.

Young children from birth through aged 8 develop and learn differently than older children; their learning and development evolves comprehensively. As more and more districts recognize this and invest in early learning initiatives, it is essential that standards and expectations are connected to the science of early learning. Approaches to learning that are grounded in the research on how young children develop and learn creates effective education systems and helps each child meet challenging and achievable learning goals. Such high standards and expectations can and should be aligned with developmentally appropriate practice at the system, district and classroom levels. It also can connect families with their child's classroom experience—providing an environment of support and reciprocal relationships between families and schools.

As much as children entering kindergarten need to be ready for school, schools must be ready to effectively support each child's development and learning. Teachers, administrators and others who help educate young children through the early grades must have specialized knowledge, skills and credentials that can build on what children already know and are able to do. In order to deliver on the promise of early learning, ESEA should allow funds to be used within state systems to promote professional development and preparation systems that support:

- Seamless progression for early care and education professionals.
- Aligned licensure and certification system and
- Compensation and recognition that supports teaching excellence.

Currently, the requirements that teachers must be "highly qualified" do not apply to the majority of teachers working in school-based pre-kindergarten programs, even when those programs are in school buildings.⁶ The reauthorization can clarify the important message that early childhood programs should be staffed by teachers, assistants and principals with direct knowledge of developmentally appropriate practice for the ages of children in the program, with access to ongoing professional development that addresses multiple domains including social emotional, language and literacy and cognition.

Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations. My staff and I look forward to working with you as reauthorization moves forward.

Sincerely,



Rhian Evans Allvin
Executive Director
National Association for the Education of Young Children

⁶ Serving Preschool Children Through Title I Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as Amended NON-REGULATORY GUIDANCE (www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/preschoolguidance2012.pdf)