



ISSUE BRIEF

INVESTING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

BACKGROUND

Research proves that quality early childhood education programs help improve children's school readiness and can help close achievement gaps that exist among children even before they enter school. Research also finds that children who participate in high-quality programs demonstrate greater interest in learning, are less likely to repeat a grade or require special education classes, and are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college. For every dollar invested in prekindergarten programs, the return can be as high as \$16, making it both smart education and economic policy.

States have recognized the benefits of early childhood education and as many as 38 fund preschool for three- and four-year-olds. However, only about 20 percent of all four-year-olds and just three percent of all three-year-olds nationally are actually enrolled in preschool programs. By comparison, many other nations with whom we compete economically – England, France, Sweden, Italy, Japan and Russia to name a few – enroll far greater proportions of their youngsters in early education programs. While the federal government has historically played a very limited role in helping to expand early childhood education offerings (e.g. Head Start, Early Head Start), President Obama and Congressional leaders have expressed support for a considerably larger investment.

On the campaign trail, the candidate Obama proposed \$10 billion in new federal funding for a comprehensive “birth to five” early education program. This may include “Early Learning Challenge Grants” that would encourage states to advance voluntary, universal preschool. In the recently passed economic stimulus package – the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act* (ARRA), the Obama administration and Congress added \$2.1 billion for Head Start and Early Head Start; \$2 billion for Child Care Development Block Grant; \$500 million for infants and families and \$400 million for preschool children with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Early education is also expected to be a focus in the president's proposed FY 2010 budget for education.

Additionally, the *Pre-K Act of 2007* (H.R. 3289) introduced by Rep. Mazie Hirono (D-HI-2) overwhelmingly passed the House Education and Labor Committee in June 2008 and, with committee leadership unchanged in the new Congress, signals the likelihood of a renewed push to advance early childhood legislation. NSBA supported H.R. 3289, which would provide, as passed by committee, \$500 million a year for five years in voluntary grants to states to expand the reach and quality of pre-kindergarten programs. Rep. Hirono has reintroduced the *Pre-K Act*, H.R. 702, in the current Congress.

NSBA RECOMMENDATIONS

Quality early childhood education programs that help prepare students, especially those most at-risk, for kindergarten and beyond can jump start the educational futures of millions of children, increase chances for closing the vexing achievement gap, and, if properly designed, help to engage more parents in their children's

education in a meaningful and lasting way. NSBA urges Congress to expand access to and funding for high-quality, voluntary, preschool programs for all three- and four-year-olds, per the resolution adopted by our membership at the 2008 Annual Conference.

In particular, NSBA urges the upcoming Congress to:

- ✓ Increase federal funding to support Head Start programs for disadvantaged students in order to help close the achievement gap between low-income children and their more affluent peers;
- ✓ Create a new federal grant program that will increase funding over the next five years to develop, expand, and enhance the quality of voluntary preschool programs for three- and four-year olds;
- ✓ Ensure federally-funded preschool programs adopt developmentally appropriate early education standards that are aligned with state K - 12 academic content standards and to require outside pre-k providers to collaborate with local school districts that seek to be involved to ensure that their programs are reflective of the expectations of local schools;
- ✓ Devote specific resources to helping school districts develop and implement joint training and professional development programs for PK - 3 instructors to help ensure a more seamless transition between preschool, kindergarten, and the elementary grades; and,
- ✓ Provide tools and incentives to replicate effective models and improve program quality. This could include assistance with data systems integral to coordinating early education services across sectors and agencies.

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