



April 2, 2010

The Honorable Tom Harkin, Chairman
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Michael Enzi, Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Harkin and Enzi:

Thank you for your leadership on public education and your commitment to a bipartisan reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. We write on behalf of Pre-K Now, a campaign of the Pew Center on the States, to urge the Congress to *recognize the importance of high-quality early education as the first step in school reform.*

We speak from the vantage point of decades of research and a growing body of recent evidence, all demonstrating the potential of large-scale, state-sponsored pre-kindergarten as a strategy to close student achievement gaps. A review of 13 evaluations of state pre-k programs – including those in Maryland, Washington and Georgia – found significant cognitive and social development among children, higher performance on achievement tests and, in some cases, reduced retention rates which produced substantial cost savings for school systems. A RAND study analyzing National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores across the country from 1990 to 1996 concluded that high-quality pre-k is one of the most effective policies for significantly raising student achievement.

In response to the research, and understanding the strong returns on the investment, governors and state legislators over the last decade have enabled far more children to come to school ready to learn. The recession has had a severe impact on states' ability to sustain and strengthen their education systems, yet governors of both parties, like Rhode Island Gov. Donald Carcieri and Iowa Gov. Chet Culver, have worked to protect and increase taxpayer investments in high-quality pre-k.

Chairman Miller also cited the strong returns on public investments in pre-k when the House Education and Labor Committee approved H.R.3289, the PRE-K Act, in the 110th Congress. Today, similar bills to create a federal-state partnership on pre-kindergarten are pending before your committee – S 839 “Prepare All Kids Act” by Senator Casey and S 240 “Ready to Learn Act” by Senators Murray and Bond.

It is time to update our landmark education law to reflect contemporary research including studies published since the ESEA was rewritten in 2001. We urge you to reflect in policy and resources what science has demonstrated: high-quality pre-k develops children’s cognitive, social-emotional and physical foundations for success in school. With these core skills, students are prepared and motivated to achieve at higher levels, *multiplying the impact of other reforms*.

Specifically, we recommend:

A new federal Pre-k-3 Incentive Fund that governors can allocate to improve early education from pre-kindergarten to third grade based on the unique needs and capacities of each state. Federal funds could be used by states for a specific, limited, research-proven set of interventions including matching school system investments in full-day kindergarten or new or expanded pre-kindergarten, and support for aligning curriculum, standards, and assessments to bolster each child’s development and growth. A pre-k through 3rd grade incentive fund would be a state-federal partnership that reflects the commitments of governors to increase access to pre-k, particularly for low-income children, and also builds on the federal commitment to accountability for results. This recommendation is consistent with the proposal in the administration’s “Blueprint for Reform” to build state and district capacity to improve school readiness. We would be pleased to provide legislative language on this and other proposals.

Designate high-quality pre-kindergarten as an option for turning around low-performing schools. Research demonstrates that low cognitive, linguistic and social functioning in the years prior to kindergarten leads to poor academic achievement in kindergarten and beyond. Not surprisingly, in New Jersey’s low-income *Abbott* school districts and in Maryland’s Montgomery County Public Schools, high-quality early education has been an integral strategy to turn around struggling schools and to improve student achievement. Guidelines for School Improvement Grants that have been made available with funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) indicate that full-day kindergarten and high-quality pre-k are “permissible” approaches for “transformation” schools. We recommend that the ESEA go further, and explicitly outline a pre-k to 3rd grade strategy for turning around the lowest performing elementary schools. This approach would include opportunities for teachers to share data, planning and professional development across grade levels, and to develop aligned and developmentally appropriate curricula and standards. Furthermore, we support the recommendation of the Council of the Great City Schools that schools identified for improvement spend an amount equal to 20 percent of Title I funds for proven interventions that include early childhood education.

Require that the State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care review state applications for formula-based and competitive grants authorized by the ESEA to assure consistency with the needs assessment and planning undertaken by these new councils mandated by the Head Start Act of 2007. The councils provide states with the opportunity to coordinate and improve early learning programs for children from birth through school age, and it is important that their role is embedded in the nation's education law.

Include children ages 3 and 4 in the ESEA funding formulas including grants authorized in Titles I and V. Children ages 3 and 4 are increasingly a part of public education through state pre-k programs and special education mandates. Funding formulas should reflect both the prevalence of younger children and the policy decisions made by states to serve this critical population.

Include pre-kindergarten teachers in all ESEA professional development programs as outlined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Teachers in federal, state- and district-funded early childhood programs should be explicitly included in all ESEA programs that seek to improve teacher quality. In the current law, sections on Improving Teacher Quality State Grants (Title II), Troops to Teachers, Transition to Teaching and the Teacher Incentive Fund are vague about their applicability to teachers of 3 and 4-year-old children. School-based and community-based teachers, including state pre-k and Head Start teachers, as well as teachers in child care centers that contract with local educational agencies, should be included in professional development programs under ESEA. Teachers should not be excluded because their important work takes place off school property.

Support the integration of early childhood data into state longitudinal data systems. Despite the progress states have made in building longitudinal student data systems, many states still do not have the capacity to link information on children's involvement in pre-k, Head Start, state-funded home visiting, and other early childhood programs within their data systems. America COMPETES and Race to the Top, the competitive grant program included in the ARRA, already foster efforts to spur and support the development of state longitudinal data systems that cover the prenatal-to-college years. Adding this element to ESEA would build on and integrate those initiatives.

Provide incentives for the development of valid and reliable measurement tools that are appropriate for young children and the classrooms in which they learn. As is the case with standards, states have led the way in developing age-appropriate assessments. This work should be supported with incentives for all states to move in the direction of continuously improving program quality. One example is New Jersey's comprehensive approach, which includes portfolio assessments of children's learning, observations of classroom quality, and statewide program evaluation by independent researchers to ensure the quality of providers in its *Abbott* preschool program. As you work to develop better accountability mechanisms for ESEA, you have the opportunity to encourage states and districts to embrace research-based, quality-focused evaluation of teacher practice and classroom environments. Federal research grants should make room for studies on how to conduct developmentally appropriate assessments of early learning.

Recognize high-quality early childhood programs as an eligible use of funds designed to extend learning time. “Extended learning time” and “increased learning time” are mentioned as turnaround strategies in the Administration’s “Blueprint” and in the guidelines for Race to the Top. State pre-k, Head Start, other programs for 3- and 4-year-olds, and full-day kindergarten, are not explicitly mentioned, even though their role is precisely that – to increase learning time.

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act offers a rare and unique opportunity to “reform up” based on emerging research on what works best to prepare young children for school, and to embrace the direct connection between strong early education and high school graduation, college- and career-readiness, and lifelong success. We look forward to working with you, your colleagues, and members of your staff as you move forward to update and improve the nation’s seminal education law. If we can provide further information, please contact us or Anya Malkov, at amalkov@pewtrusts.org. Thank you for your consideration.

Yours sincerely,



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cc: Members, Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions