

State Policies That Work



IMPROVING THE READINESS OF CHILDREN FOR SCHOOL

A Series of Policy Briefs from the Policy Matters Project

Brief No. 2

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INTRODUCTION

The well-being of young children and adults is significantly related to the quality of their early care and education (ECE) experience. States wishing to improve children's long-term prospects for success must consider the enactment of policies that strengthen the quality of the ECE system and provide necessary supports to working families.

School Readiness is defined broadly as the preparedness of young children 0-8 years of age to enter school and the preparedness of schools to receive young children into public educational settings. This brief focuses on young children and the major policies that support their social, cognitive, and emotional development and on child-serving systems and their capacity to deliver high quality, developmentally appropriate care and education.

This brief is a companion to a complete policy and research paper that details the history of school readiness efforts and offers a beginning framework for state ECE policy critical to promoting school readiness. The complete paper is one in a series of papers available from the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) at www.cssp.org. Policy and research papers and companion "Policies That Work" briefs are available for six core outcomes: family economic success, school readiness, healthy families, educational success, youth engagement, and strong family relationships. Interested readers may obtain these publications from the CSSP website (www.cssp.org) or by calling the Center at 202-371-1565.

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POLICY 1 **State-funded ECE Programs**

Finding accessible, quality services is considered a challenge for large numbers of American families. Nearly nine out of ten adults state that finding affordable quality child care is difficult.¹ A U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) study found that the supply of child care was sufficient to meet only 16 percent of the demand for infant care and 23 percent of the demand for preschool care.² While finding quality services is a challenge for all families, it is particularly critical for lower-income families who are less likely than higher-income families to have access to ECE programs.³ In order to assist families in meeting their child care needs, and to promote children's access to quality ECE, significant state investments are needed.

To measure investment in programs for both preschoolers and infants and toddlers, two distinct but equally important dimensions of program funding are considered: investments per capita and investments per enrolled child. The first dimension (per capita) considers the overall level of investment relative to the number of potentially enrolled children in the state. This measure is informative but alone does not fully capture state investment since it does not consider the amount of investment per child enrolled in the program. For this reason, a second dimension (per enrolled child) is presented that considers the amount of the investment per child actually enrolled. By presenting two measures for both the preschool and infant and toddler programs, the amount of state investment in ECE is better assessed. In addition to these investment measures, policy features that focus on the nature of the investment in state-funded programs are presented (e.g., eligibility).

1.1 Per Capita Preschool Investment. Nationally, only one in seven families eligible for child care subsidies is receiving assistance,⁴ and despite nearly 35 years of investment in Head Start, the program still serves only about three out of five eligible children.⁵ Total amount of state investments in the provision of programs for preschoolers (3- and 4-year-olds) should be at least \$500 per 3- or 4-year-old in the state.

1.2 Per Child Preschool Investment. Many states have pre-kindergarten programs; yet most serve only a small percentage of children or only fund part-day programs that fail to meet the needs of working parents.⁶ Others are not funded at levels that allow a quality preschool experience for enrolled children. States should allocate at least \$8,000 - \$12,000 per enrolled preschooler to fund full-day, quality pre-kindergarten services or \$4,000 - \$6,000 per enrolled preschooler to fund half-day, quality pre-kindergarten services.

1.3 Preschool Eligibility. States should provide, regardless of family income, full-day preschool programs for all 3- and 4-year-old children whose parents elect to use it.

- 1.4 Per Capita Investment in Programs for Infants and Toddlers.** Studies show that limited availability and long waiting lists for infant and toddler care restrict parents' choices.⁷ For example, states spend over \$1 billion on preschool programs, but only \$226 million on programs to promote the well-being of infants and toddlers.⁸ The overall amount of state investment in programs for infants and toddlers (0-3 years of age) should be at least \$500 per 0-3-year-old.
- 1.5 Per Child Investment in Programs for Infants and Toddlers.** States should allocate \$10,000 - \$15,000 per enrolled child to fund full-day, quality infant and toddler child development services or \$5,000 - \$7,500 per enrolled child to fund half-day services.
- 1.6 Program Eligibility for Infants and Toddlers.** States should provide full-day, voluntary care and education for all infants and toddlers, whose parents wish to enroll them, by funding early intervention and child development programs for all 0-3-year-olds, regardless of family income.
- 1.7 Diverse ECE Settings.** To allow the greatest range of parental choice in selecting care and education for their children, states should support ECE programs in a variety of program settings, including child care centers, family day care homes, and public schools.

POLICY 2 **Child Care Subsidies**

The National Survey of America's Families found that higher-income families pay higher prices for child care (\$317 per month as opposed to \$217 for lower income families). However, higher-income families pay a smaller percentage of their income on child care (6 percent as opposed to 165 percent paid by lower-income families) and lower income families often receive poorer quality care for the amounts they pay.⁹

With policies placing increased emphasis on work requirements for low-income parents, large numbers of low-income women have returned to the workforce, creating an intensified demand for quality child care.¹⁰ Yet, the availability of child care assistance is significantly limited. Currently, only one in seven children eligible for subsidies through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) is receiving child care assistance.¹¹

- 2.1 TANF Investments in ECE.** Existing policy permits the use of TANF dollars for child care as a supplement to CCDF funds. In 2000, only two states did not use some portion of their TANF funds for child care, yet the value of these investments varied significantly.¹² States should dedicate at least \$500 in TANF funds per 0-5-year-old to provide or enhance availability of ECE services.
- 2.2 Subsidy Income Eligibility.** States' eligibility levels vary considerably, ranging from 122 percent to 325 percent of the federal poverty level.¹³ Currently, only one state has a legal entitlement that guarantees child care

for eligible working families needing child care assistance. Because of the increasing work demands placed on low-income families and the high cost of child care, at a minimum, states should expand income eligibility for child care assistance up to 75 percent of the state median income and guarantee availability of subsidies for all working families.

2.3 Reimbursement Rates. The cost of quality care and education exceeds the reimbursement rates established by most states.¹⁴ At a minimum, states should set subsidy payment rates at a level adequate for providing quality care, between 75 and 99 percent of the market rate, based on recent market rate surveys.

2.4 Enhanced Reimbursements. Quality child care shortages exist in low-income and rural communities, and for infants, children with special needs, and children needing care at night and on weekends.¹⁵ In addition, higher-quality care is more expensive to provide.¹⁶ To address this need, states should pay additional rates to providers of high-quality care, care to children with special needs, care for children in rural areas, odd-hour care, and/or care for children at risk or in low-income communities. At a minimum, states should provide differential rates for at least three of these types of care.

2.5 Parent Co-payments. Full-day, full-year care for one child can cost parents up to \$10,000 per year – more than tuition at many state higher education institutions.¹⁷ Although subsidy programs reduce the cost to families, some states charge large parent co-pays.¹⁸ All states should keep parent co-pays for child care (irrespective of the number of children in care) below ten percent of family income and waive co-payments for families below the poverty line.

2.6 Eligibility Re-determination. To make subsidies and child care easily accessible, states should require eligibility re-determination no more than once per year and allow families to re-apply by phone and mail.

2.7 Subsidy Eligibility for Post-secondary Education and Job Training Participants. Post-secondary education and effective job training have the potential to result in greater family economic security for low-income families.¹⁹ Despite the importance of these programs, many states do not extend child care subsidy eligibility to parents in college or job training programs,²⁰ creating a major barrier to continued participation in such opportunities.²¹ Given this evidence, states should extend subsidies to parents participating in post-secondary education and job training programs.

POLICY 3 **Child Care Tax Provisions**

Another way states can make child care affordable for families is to enact child care tax provisions, often modeled after the federal credit. Twenty-six states currently utilize these tax provisions to help make child care more affordable for families.²² These provisions provide a tax write-off or credit to reimburse families for some of their child care expenses during the tax year. Tax provisions also allow for an entitlement for child care assistance, since tax breaks are not limited by yearly appropriations.²³ Tax provisions may be less stigmatizing to lower-income families and easier to gain political support for than direct payments through the subsidy program.²⁴

- 3.1 Amount of State Child and Dependent Care Tax Provision.** The forgone revenue lost by offering a child and dependent care tax provision is an important form of state investment in ECE. This “forgone” revenue should equal at least \$500 per 0-5-year-old in the state.
- 3.2 Refundability.** For many low-income working families with no tax liability, non-refundable provisions provide little to no financial relief for the high cost of caring for children and dependents. Currently, ten states have enacted refundable provisions.²⁵ All states should enact a completely refundable child care tax provision.
- 3.3 Value of Tax Provision.** Six states maintain provisions at 25 percent or less than the federal credit; ten states offer provisions greater than or equal to 50 percent of the federal credit; and five states offer provisions equal to or greater than 100 percent of the federal credit. Other states do not offer a specific value, but link the value of their provision to the federal credit, ranging from 10 to 110 percent. Child and dependent tax provisions should equal, at minimum, the federal credit and preferably be set at 200 percent of the federal credit (\$2,100 - \$4,200 for 2+ dependents).
- 3.4 Targeting Provisions to Low-income Families.** In order to better support low-income families who pay a disproportionate amount of their income for child care expenses,²⁶ states should target greater tax provision benefits to low-income families.²⁷ States should ensure that the lowest-income families receive over 50 percent more in payment than the highest income families eligible for the provision.
- 3.5 Provision Available to Low-income Families.** States with eligibility requirements linked to federal tax liability effectively exclude low-income working families with little or no tax liability, though these families incur expenses comparable to higher-income families.²⁸ States with provisions based upon the federal credit should ensure that families are eligible without regard to their federal tax liability.

3.6 Provision Available to All Taxpayers. Another policy decision that affects eligibility is the income limit set by states. States should not set an income eligibility limit for child and dependent care tax provisions. Nine states set income limits from a low of \$21,424 to a high of \$100,000. Nineteen states have no limits, treating all families with legitimate work-related expenses equitably.²⁹

3.7 Accessibility of Tax Provisions. It is important that states make the child and dependent care tax provisions easy to gain access to and apparent to families. States without such clarity in their tax forms are more likely to have eligible families overlook this valuable tax relief. States should include a specific line for the provision on both the short and long tax forms, where applicable.³⁰

POLICY 4 **Licensing and Accreditation**

Data are clear that regulations, licensing standards, and program accreditation promote and are correlated with higher-quality care.³¹ However, nearly one-third of the states have standards low enough to allow situations that threaten the physical safety and healthy development of children.³² States with more demanding licensing standards have been found to have fewer poor-quality centers.³³ Yet, there are great disparities in how and what states elect to license, how such licenses are enforced, and what incentives and supports states provide for accreditation.³⁴ Given the importance of these variables to quality and given the diversity of state attention to these variables, they are important elements to be included in the policy areas presented herein. Specifically, ECE research and practice point to the following key policy features in this area:

4.1 Maximum Group Size. Group size is uniquely associated with positive caregiving.³⁵ States should require child care centers to meet the group size standards for all ages (infants to five years) as defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and American Academy of Pediatrics/American Public Health Association (AAP/APHA).

4.2 Teacher-to-Child Ratios. Higher teacher-to-child ratios are associated with more stimulating, responsive, warm, and supportive care.³⁶ In addition, higher teacher-to-child ratios are associated with higher ratings on quality assessments and more positive child outcomes.³⁷ States should require child care centers to meet the minimum teacher-to-child ratio standards for each age group as defined by NAEYC and AAP/APHA.

4.3 Staff Qualifications. Staff qualifications are significantly related to the overall quality of an ECE system.³⁸ Caregivers who have more formal education and more specialized training pertaining to children offer care that is more stimulating, warm, and supportive.³⁹ Highly educated and specially trained caregivers also are more likely to organize materials and activities into a more age-appropriate environment for children.⁴⁰

State policies governing staff qualifications should require all programs to meet the staff qualifications recommended by national associations.

4.4 Licensing Enforcement. Without a strong system of enforcement visits, state regulations may have little impact on the quality of care that children receive. Currently, most licensing agencies are underfunded, understaffed and cannot adequately monitor providers.⁴¹ At a minimum, states should mandate and fund licensing agencies to visit all child care centers or family child care homes at least two times a year.

4.5 Family Child Care Regulations. One national study found that over one-third of family child care programs were rated as inadequate, which means quality was so poor it could harm a child's development.⁴² To improve the quality of family child care, states should require adults (other than parents or guardians) caring for three or more children on a regular basis to register as a family child care provider with the appropriate state agency.

4.6 Exemptions from State Regulation. Many states legally exempt large numbers of programs from regulation. For example, fourteen states allow exemptions from licensing for nursery schools, preschools, or pre-K, while thirteen states allow exemption from licensing for religious centers.⁴³ States should require all center-based programs providing care on a regular basis to meet all licensing standards.

4.7 Program Accreditation. Accreditation is a voluntary process that programs pursue to enhance their quality. Research has shown that centers that comply with additional standards, such as accreditation, provide better care.⁴⁴ Seven states require their pre-K programs to be accredited.⁴⁵ States should encourage program accreditation by providing incentives and rewards to programs that achieve and maintain NAEYC or comparable accreditation.

POLICY 5 Professional Development and Compensation

A recent National Academy of Science report, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, noted: "Quality of care ultimately boils down to the quality of the relationship between the child care provider or teacher and the child."⁴⁶ A second report, *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*, identified the critical influence of young children's caregivers.⁴⁷ Research is unequivocal in relating the formal education and specialized training of caregivers to higher quality ECE.⁴⁸ Other studies have shown that caregiver wages are related to higher quality interactions with children.⁴⁹ States should pursue the following policy features in an effort to improve the education, specialized training, and compensation of its early care workforce:

- 5.1 Pre-service Requirements.** States should require minimum levels of education prior to employment (pre-service). Teachers with higher general educational levels (and specifically with early childhood-related education) are more skilled at helping young children develop and learn.⁵⁰ Minimum levels of pre-service education are needed for center directors, lead teachers, teachers, assistant teachers, and family child care providers. A comprehensive set of pre-service requirements would address each of the following in all program types: (1) center directors (MA/MS in ECE, CD, EC Admin); (2) lead teachers (MA/MS in ECE/CD); (3) teachers (BA/BS in ECE/CD); (4) assistant teachers (AAS in ECE/CD); (5) family child care providers (AAS in ECE/CD).
- 5.2 In-service Requirements.** Formal in-service requirements are essential for maintaining a workforce knowledgeable about current care and education practice. Recent, specialized training in child development is associated with high-quality care in all types of settings.⁵¹ Minimum levels of in-service training should include at least 25 clock hrs/CEUs per year of ongoing professional development for center directors, lead teachers, teachers, assistant teachers, and family child care providers, plus a requirement of 6 credit hours toward the pre-service degree requirements for any early childhood personnel who do not meet the pre-service degree requirements upon hire.
- 5.3 Professional Development Funding.** *Eager to Learn: Educating our Preschoolers* states that “at the heart of the effort to promote quality early childhood programs, from the committee’s perspective, is a substantial investment in the education and training of those who work with young children.”⁵² In order to support professional development, states should fund professional development programs at a minimum of \$800 per early childhood professional.
- 5.4 Professional Development Programs.** In order for ECE providers to continue their education and receive additional training, supportive programs are needed.⁵³ State funding for professional development should be devoted to a comprehensive mix of supports (scholarships, loan forgiveness programs, release time, direct payments, and course credit) to assist providers in reaching higher levels of education and skill. At least three of these supports should be combined in order to offer flexible, appropriate assistance.
- 5.5 Professional Development System.** State experience demonstrates that a coordinated professional development system is necessary if efforts to improve the education and training of ECE provider are to be successful.⁵⁴ States should mandate, fund, and provide legal or administrative authority to a statewide consortium of key early childhood stakeholders who are charged with developing and implementing a

well-coordinated, well-articulated, and effective system of early childhood professional development.

5.6 Teacher Compensation. Professional, quality ECE is hard to find in a marketplace where ECE providers do not earn as much as funeral attendants (\$17,320) or garbage collectors (\$25,020).⁵⁵ Despite having higher levels of formal education than the average American worker,⁵⁶ ECE providers earn low wages⁵⁷ and rarely receive benefits or paid leave.⁵⁸ Not surprisingly, given the low salaries, staff turnover is as much as 36 percent in early childhood programs outside the public schools.⁵⁹ Turnover is a significant factor associated with poorer quality programs and poorer child outcomes in language and social skills.⁶⁰ In order to attract ECE providers with more education, as well as retain current providers, states should invest in efforts to raise compensation and benefits for all state-funded ECE programs to levels comparable to public school teachers with similar education and experience.⁶¹

POLICY 6 ECE Systems Development

The wide assortment of federal, state, and local early childhood education services and programs is problematic because different programs are managed by different agencies, leading to mission fragmentation and program overlap,⁶² as well as gaps in policy, funding streams, eligibility, fees, and programming results.⁶³ Consequently, some families receive inconsistent services, while others fall through the cracks altogether.⁶⁴ To address this crisis in coordination, the following policy decisions are recommended:

6.1 State Governance Entities. State governance entities can organize and improve services across programs – creating incentives, supports, and accountability mechanisms to increase program coordination, availability, and quality.⁶⁵ A number of state and local governments have created such governance and planning entities⁶⁶ and made notable progress in linking early childhood services with health and other social services, streamlining service delivery, and increasing programmatic efficiency.⁶⁷ States should mandate and fund state governance entities to oversee and coordinate ECE services for children ages 0-5 years.

6.2 Local Governance Entities. Local governance entities are needed to ensure a good match between the supply of programs in a given community and the needs of the families who live there. Some communities may have enough programs to serve three- and four-year-olds, for example, but a dearth of badly needed infant and toddler programs, programs for children with special needs, or programs that operate in the evening or on weekends.⁶⁸ In the absence of this kind of governance and planning, many children experience inappropriate discontinuities as they are jostled from one setting to another. Large numbers of children (some estimate up to 45 percent of low-income children)⁶⁹ have to make these adjustments

in the course of a single day or week. States should mandate and fund local governance entities to oversee and coordinate ECE services for children ages 0-5 years old in their community.⁷⁰

- 6.3 Linkages Between State and Local Governance Entities.** In order to coordinate the efforts of the state and local governance entities described above, states should create, monitor, and financially support linking mechanisms between the state and local governance entities.
- 6.4 Parent Involvement.** Policymakers should not underestimate the importance of parents to their children’s development,⁷¹ or the governance process.⁷² Head Start offers a model of parent involvement in governance, which has been shown to benefit children, parents, and the early childhood program.⁷³ States should require governance entities to include a diverse group of parents and consumers in program and policy decisions and in the governance entities previously described.
- 6.5 A Long-term ECE Plan.** Long-term planning is essential in order for states to integrate various services for children and families.⁷⁴ Without such a governing plan, state ECE systems are destined to remain fragmented and displaced in their focus on outcomes. States should require and fund the development of such plans and require significant public input.
- 6.6 Coordinating Mechanisms.** Parents report feeling that they have few choices for ECE and limited information to distinguish among options.⁷⁵ Child care markets would work more effectively if parents had access to more information about program quality and help finding a suitable care situation.⁷⁶ States should foster the coordination of information on all ECE services through a coordinating mechanism such as a Child Care Resource and Referral Agency.⁷⁷
- 6.7 Public Awareness Campaign.** There is a current lack of understanding among much of the public as to the definition of school readiness, the critical importance of ECE, and the potential of the early years in promoting children’s later success. Improving the public’s awareness of the importance of the early years and the value of ECE can result in better child care arrangement decisions, better parenting practices, and broader public support for and participation in ECE initiatives and services.⁷⁸ States should improve public awareness and understanding by planning and implementing a statewide public education campaign.
- 6.8 Collaboration Among Schools, Health, and ECE Services.** Roughly four million children enter kindergarten each year.⁷⁹ This transition into kindergarten is recognized as a critical passage for young children and their families.⁸⁰ In most cases, there are benefits from even a relatively small investment of time or resources spent on developing linkages and transitions.⁸¹ States should require and fund coordinating mechanisms

among schools, ECE systems, and health systems, including transition efforts, joint professional development, transfer of records, and joint planning.⁸²

POLICY 7 **ECE Standards and Assessment**

There is currently a significant focus on gauging the quality of human services in terms of the results that programs or interventions produce for children.⁸³ This is coupled with a growing interest in screening and assessing children to determine how to best provide educational services that promote their growth and development.⁸⁴ This focus on child assessment – focusing on what children can do – can yield benefits if it builds in safeguards for children and is accomplished with great care.⁸⁵ By defining results clearly, practitioners working with young children can tailor their efforts more precisely to meet the desired results for individual children. When child-based results are specified, they can become the basis for evaluating programs and providing the kind of feedback that can help programs make critical decisions and improve quality.⁸⁶

While the focus on standards and assessments has grown, particular concern has been raised about emphasizing results in a number of specific contexts: when measuring results for children younger than three and children who are ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse; when the data may be used to make “high-stakes” decisions concerning children’s placement (including retention or delaying kindergarten entry); and when results may be used as the basis for decisions about resource allocation, such as merit pay for teachers or levels of program reimbursement.⁸⁷ The following recommendations attempt to build on the benefits of standards and assessments while minimizing some of the serious concerns:

7.1 Health Screenings. Early screenings are important since many health-related impairments can be screened and treated if early screening services are available to young children and their families.⁸⁸ State-mandated and funded health screenings and referrals – prior to entry into child care, pre-kindergarten, and kindergarten – can detect problems that might impede children’s readiness for school. States should mandate health screenings and referrals, as well as provide financial support for these screenings for all children upon entry into child care, pre-K, and kindergarten.

7.2 Pre-kindergarten Learning Standards. Children tend to learn more and be better prepared for formal schooling when they attend well-planned, high-quality preschools in which curricular aims are specified and delivered, necessitating content standards for these early years.⁸⁹ States should develop and monitor use of coordinated and appropriate learning standards for pre-K children. Such standards should be available for all five dimensions of school readiness (as defined by the National Education Goals Panel)⁹⁰ and should be coordinated with standards for grades K-12.

7.3 Instructional Assessments for Child Care and Pre-kindergarten.

Another primary purpose for early childhood assessments is to inform the instructional process and support children's learning.⁹¹ ECE providers can use assessments to gauge what things children already know and understand, what things could be understood with more practice and experience, and what things are too difficult without further groundwork.⁹² Teachers also can use their assessments of children's learning to reflect on their own teaching practices, and adjust and modify ineffective curricula, instructional activities, and classroom routines.⁹³ States can support the use of assessment in child care and pre-kindergarten programs to promote children's learning and development by requiring and funding assessments of children for this purpose. State regulations should require and set forth appropriate standards for completion and use of these assessments.

7.4 School Readiness Assessments. Assessing the readiness of students as they enter school can be useful for planning more effective services and investments in ECE and public schools.⁹⁴ Such assessments, however, should not be used to make high-stakes decisions about individual children.⁹⁵ Currently, only six states require testing to gauge school readiness statewide.⁹⁶ States should require and fund completion of a school readiness assessment, appropriately aligned with standards, for a representative sample of children entering school.

7.5 Instructional Assessment for Kindergartners. States should mandate and provide financial supports for instructional assessments of kindergartners to guide instruction.

POLICY 8 **Facilities and Capital Investments**

Growing rates of maternal employment over the last 40 years have significantly increased the number of children in non-parental ECE.⁹⁷ Despite this growth in the use of ECE programs, much less attention has been paid to expanding the number of available physical spaces to accommodate such growth. Moreover, the existing supply of ECE facilities is unequally distributed, with lower-income communities having many fewer licensed settings.⁹⁸ To address these problems, eighteen states have developed some form of a child care facilities financing program. Yet, there is variation among the programs in structure, funding, and services provided.⁹⁹ All states should undertake efforts to plan for and finance facilities construction and capital investment, with special attention to allocating investments to the communities with the greatest need. The following policy decisions are critical in this policy area:

8.1 State Support for Capital Investments. Investments in facilities are needed to address the shortages of high-quality licensed care across the country.¹⁰⁰ States should take a leadership role in these efforts by: (1) convening all levels of government and private entities to leverage funds and coordinate capital planning; (2) contributing funding to create

or implement a capital plan; and (3) identifying a government or private body responsible for implementing a capital plan.¹⁰¹

8.2 Capital Plan. In order to ensure that the physical infrastructure needs of a state ECE system are addressed, states must assess the current availability of settings and conduct long-term planning. This process should begin with the development of an accessible and methodologically sound capital plan, based upon a recent needs assessment, updated regularly, and made available to the public. States should also include in the capital plan strategies to leverage resources from financial institutions, foundations, employers, and other levels of government.

8.3 Existing Facilities Improvement. States can maximize the use of existing physical infrastructure and promote quality enhancements at the same time by supporting capital investment in renovating existing facilities.¹⁰² States should make available to existing ECE providers, either through government agencies or community-based intermediaries, grants and loans to meet a variety of improvement needs for existing physical space.

8.4 New Facilities Construction. New facilities construction is warranted in many areas of the country. However, generating initial capital for facilities construction can be quite difficult for non-profit centers and family child care providers.¹⁰³ In contrast, for-profit chains usually have the internal resources and experience to expand, but they have not generally invested in poor communities where the new facilities are most needed.¹⁰⁴ For these reasons, states should address shortages of existing physical infrastructure through broad, state-initiated financing programs through bonding authorities or financial institutions.

8.5 Incentive to Increase Access in Underserved Areas. Since shortages of quality ECE are greater in low-income communities,¹⁰⁵ state capital plans should attempt to commit some funds to capital needs in underserved areas. States should allocate funds to highest priority needs and low-income areas and/or establish funding for grant and loan programs focused on underserved communities.

POLICY 9 **Kindergarten Quality**

The condition of the schools that receive children is just as critical to school readiness as the developmental state of children as they enter kindergarten.¹⁰⁶ Recent analysis of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study illustrates that the most disadvantaged of America's children are "systematically mapped into our nation's worst schools."¹⁰⁷ State governments, who have primary responsibility for the education system in their states, should address this inequity and ensure that at least minimal standards of quality in education are available to every kindergartner who enters school. The quality of kindergarten teachers, the size of kindergarten classrooms, and the presence of kindergarten learning standards all shape the quality of the education provided to five-year-olds across the country.

- 9.1 Full-day Kindergarten.** Children in full-day kindergarten receive additional instructional time¹⁰⁸ and have been found to make greater academic gains during the kindergarten year.¹⁰⁹ Currently, 26 states finance full-day kindergarten.¹¹⁰ States can better support working families by providing funding for full-day, full-week kindergarten for all children.
- 9.2 School District Requirements to Provide Kindergarten.** In many states, local school districts retain discretion over whether to offer full-day, full-week kindergarten. However, states can require local districts to provide full-day, full-week kindergarten to all children whose parents wish to enroll them. Forty-two states require districts to offer kindergarten; however, only eight of these require districts to offer full-day kindergarten.¹¹¹
- 9.3 Kindergarten Teacher Certification.** Teacher quality is perhaps the most important component of a high-quality school experience. The federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 places some emphasis on defining and requiring “highly qualified teachers” who are required to possess preparation, knowledge, and skills in the content areas they teach. Seventeen states require kindergarten teachers to have specific certification or courses in early childhood.¹¹² All states should adopt a requirement that kindergarten teachers have specific certification and ongoing training in early childhood education.
- 9.4 Kindergarten Class Size.** Studies of variation in test scores across the states for students with similar family backgrounds found that lower pupil-teacher ratios explains higher student achievement levels, especially in lower grades.¹¹³ Consequently, states should limit kindergarten class size to sixteen pupils. Despite the research support for this policy, no state currently limits all kindergarten classrooms to 16 students, although seven states have set maximum kindergarten class sizes at 20 students or fewer.¹¹⁴
- 9.5 Kindergarten Learning Standards.** States should adopt kindergarten learning standards that specifically address the five domains of early learning and development. Although 20 states have standards for the kindergarten year, information on the quality and appropriateness of those learning standards is not currently available.¹¹⁵

CONCLUSION

This brief presents nine policy recommendations aimed at advancing all children's readiness for school. The recommendations are intended to help state policymakers think strategically about policy decisions that create opportunities for young children to experience high quality Early Care and Education (ECE) services. The recommendations are designed to enable state policymakers to consider policy options in a coordinated and systemic manner, rather than expending scarce resources on various discrete programs or services for young children without considering their collective impact. This brief and its companion policy and research paper represent a first step in a larger project that, when complete, will enable states to compare their policy efforts to established benchmarks, track their progress on the readiness agenda over time, and compare their state's efforts to that of other states.

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About the Policy Matters Project

Policy Matters is an initiative of the Center for the Study of Social Policy in collaboration with the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) and Child Trends. The *Policy Matters* project is designed to develop and make available coherent, comprehensive information regarding the strength and adequacy of state policies affecting children, families, and communities. The project seeks to establish consensus among policy experts and state leaders regarding the mix of policies believed to offer the best opportunity for improving child and family well-being. A series of policy briefs, policy papers, guides for self-assessment, and 50-state comparative reports are envisioned. The project focuses on six core results: school readiness, educational success, family economic success, healthy families, youth development, and strong family relationships. These six core results comprise one composite family-strengthening policy agenda, emphasizing the importance of both individual results and the interaction of multiple results.

About the Partners

The Center for the Study of Social Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan policy organization located in Washington, D.C. The Center's mission is to promote policies and practices that improve the living conditions and opportunities of low-income and other disadvantaged persons. The Center works in partnership with federal, state, and local governments and communities to shape new ideas for public policy, to provide technical assistance to states and communities, and to develop and lead networks of innovators.

The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) identifies and promotes strategies that prevent child poverty in the United States and that improve the lives of low-income children and their families. NCCP designs and conducts field-based studies to identify programs, policies, and practices that work best for young children and their families living in poverty. NCCP further advances its mission by disseminating information about early childhood care and education, child health, and family and community support to government officials, private organizations, and child advocates, and provides a state and local perspective on relevant national issues.

Child Trends is a non-profit, non-partisan research organization dedicated to improving the lives of children by conducting research and providing science-based information to improve the decisions, programs, and policies that affect children. In advancing this mission, Child Trends collects and analyzes data; conducts, synthesizes, and disseminates research; designs and evaluates programs; and develops and tests promising approaches to research in the field. Child Trends has achieved a reputation as one of the nation's leading sources of credible data and high-quality research on children.

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