

Partnering with States to Improve Early Learning

Overview

Efforts to improve early childhood learning will not work unless they involve States and school districts, which shoulder the primary responsibility for providing public education. Since States and districts are directly responsible for student learning and achievement in school, preparing children to learn before they start school is in their best interest. This is particularly true now that the *No Child Left Behind* law requires standards and accountability for every school in America. Many States and districts have already taken concrete steps in recognition that, in order for students to succeed once they reach school, they must come prepared to learn.

The Administration's plan calls on all States to take steps that will help prepare children before they enter school to be ready to learn. For example, States should help coordinate the public schools with the early childhood programs that serve the children they later educate. This can be accomplished in part by making available to early childhood programs information on what will be expected of children once they reach school and what skills children will need to learn before school in order to meet State standards in school.

The Administration's plan also envisions a Federal partnership with States to strengthen early learning by providing greater flexibility with Federal funds and by offering resources in the form of teacher training and program guidance. The Federal government already partners with States in many ways, including through early childhood funding. In order to access Federal CCDF and TANF funds to provide early childhood programs, States must submit a biennial plan on how they will use their funds. At least 4 percent of these funds must be spent on improving the quality of child care. States must also provide maintenance of effort (MOE) expenditures and matching funds based on their current Medicaid matching rate, which ranges from 50 to 76 percent. They may use part of their State spending on pre-k programs to meet up to 20 percent of these matching requirements. In 2000, States exceeded the amount required to draw down Federal funds, spending at least \$2.2 billion of State funds on early childhood programs.

Summary of Initiatives

Encourage States to Set Quality Criteria for Early Childhood Education. In exchange for Federal CCDF funds, which include a set-aside to improve the quality of care, States would be required to identify in their biennial State plan a set of quality-related criteria. Goals would include:

- **Early Learning Guidelines.** Voluntary State guidelines on literacy, language, and pre-reading skills activities for children ages 3 to 5 that align with State K-12 standards. These guidelines should be able to be adapted to various child care settings;
- **Professional development.** A State plan for offering education and training activities to child care and pre-school teachers and administrators, which can also include Federally funded training initiatives;

- **Program Coordination.** A State plan for coordinating at least four early childhood programs, which may include CCDF, Head Start, programs in the public schools, and TANF, among others.

Expand State Flexibility in Child Care Match. To give States more flexibility in funding their quality criteria, they would be allowed to increase to 30 percent the amount of State pre-k funds they can use to match Federal child care funds. Currently States may use their spending on pre-k programs to meet up to 20 percent of the CCDF matching requirements.

Establish New State Program Integration Waivers. As part of the President’s Welfare Reform proposal, States will be able to seek new waivers for integrating funding and program rules across a broad range of public assistance programs, including those that benefit young children. These waivers will enable States and school districts to better coordinate early childhood programs. For example, States could integrate TANF, Child Care, Food Stamps, Workforce Investment Act, and Employment Assistance programs into a comprehensive workforce assistance system that includes early childhood care.

Establish Early Childhood Educator Academies. The Department of Education will host regional Early Childhood Educator Academies to deliver scientifically-based research on cognitive development and highlight practical ideas to pre-k teachers and child care providers. The Academies will use model training methods and rely on nationally recognized early childhood experts.

Provide Guidance to States on Coordination of Services. The Early Childhood-Head Start Task Force (U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services) will provide guidance to States on how to coordinate early childhood services and programs in order to avoid duplication of services and improve children’s learning as they transition from pre-k to elementary school.