



## **THE EARLY LEARNING CHALLENGE FUND**

### **Results-Oriented, Standards Reform of State Early Learning Programs**

*“And we should raise the bar when it comes to early learning programs... Today, some early learning programs are excellent. Some are mediocre. And some are wasting what studies show are – by far – a child’s most formative years. That’s why I have issued a challenge to America’s governors: if you match the success of states like Pennsylvania and develop an effective model for early learning; if you focus reform on standards and results in early learning programs; if you demonstrate how you will prepare the lowest income children to meet the highest standards of success – then you can compete for an Early Learning Challenge Grant that will help prepare all our children to enter kindergarten ready to learn.”*

- President Barack Obama  
Remarks to the NAACP, July 16, 2009

Today, Education Secretary Arne Duncan and Health and Human Service Secretary Kathleen Sebelius described President Obama’s plan to reform and improve early learning programs as part of the Administration’s agenda to deliver a complete and competitive education to every child in America. The Obama Administration’s Early Learning Challenge Grant proposal would challenge states to develop effective, innovative models that promote high standards of quality and a focus on outcomes across early learning settings, and dedicate \$10 billion over ten years toward this effort.

### **A STRONG FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS**

The years prior to kindergarten are among the most significant in shaping a child’s foundation for learning and school success. Research has shown that a child’s learning begins at birth, and takes shape as children are nurtured, challenged, and engaged in high-quality learning environments and in relationships with parents and other caregivers.

A robust body of evidence and research demonstrates that high quality early learning programs help children arrive at kindergarten ready to succeed in school and in life. Disadvantaged children who have access to such programs – from birth through age 5 – are more likely to improve their cognitive, social, emotional, and language development. Later effects of high-quality programs are well documented to improve academic achievement, reduce the need for special education, increase employment and earnings, reduce crime and delinquency, and ultimately increase international competitiveness.

And empirical studies have proven that investments in high-quality early learning are among the most cost-effective of any investment along the educational pipeline, returning as high as 15-17 percent on the investment each year.

### **PROMOTING QUALITY IN EARLY LEARNING SETTINGS**

Each day, over 11 million children under the age of 5 spend time outside of the care of their parents, and in a wide variety of environments – each of which should promote and encourage their early learning and development. The quality of early learning settings varies greatly, and despite some progress, early childhood education programs are held to inconsistent standards among and within states.

Without a uniform system of standards to guide the effectiveness of programs, it is often the most disadvantaged children who are left behind. By the time children are 3, disparities in early vocabulary growth between those whose parents are professionals and those from working class families amount to over 50 percent. Studies have documented a school

readiness gap as early as kindergarten entry – and as wide as 60 percentage points – between children from the highest socio-economic background and their peers from the lowest group.

President Barack Obama believes that we cannot afford to short-change the early learning needs of our youngest children. America’s economic competitiveness depends on providing a high-quality learning environment for every child – from birth through age 5 – to get the early start needed to succeed in school and in life.

## **RAISING THE BAR: THE EARLY LEARNING CHALLENGE FUND**

Some states have made significant progress in shaping and developing early learning systems, and many have already begun to address the conditions necessary for promoting early learning and development. Leading states that have embarked on reform report a need for more coordinated and integrated early learning services and programs, and a commitment to accountability and results to ensure that a system with multiple funding streams and settings improves outcomes for all children.

### **THE CHALLENGE**

The Early Learning Challenge Fund will challenge Governors to develop new approaches to raising the bar across state early learning settings. States would compete to establish model systems of early learning that:

- **Drive results-oriented, standards reform across programs**, setting a high standard of quality for programs to strive toward, in order to better promote early learning, child development, and school readiness.
- **Fund and implement pathways to improve existing early learning programs**, with the goal of increasing the number of low-income young children who participate in higher-quality settings.
- **Ensure that more children enter kindergarten ready**, with the healthy cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills and ability necessary for success.

### **THE SYSTEM**

The Early Learning Challenge Fund would promote the following components of a model early learning system:

- **Aligned early learning and development standards** that lead to school readiness and are integrated with program quality to guide curriculum and program development.
- **An evidence-based quality rating system** structured with progressive levels of quality – which may be used across early learning settings and programs.
- **An effective system of program review, monitoring, and improvement** applied across all programs and settings.
- **An evidence-based system of professional development** to prepare an effective and well-qualified workforce of early educators, including appropriate levels of training, education, and credentials.
- **Strategies for families and parents to better assess quality** in their child’s early learning program and better support their child’s learning.
- **Systems to facilitate screening and referrals** for health, mental health, disability and family support.
- **A coordinated zero to five data infrastructure** to collect essential information on where young children spend their time and the effectiveness of programs that serve them.
- **An age- and developmentally-appropriate curriculum and assessment system** that is used to guide practice, improve programs, and inform kindergarten readiness.

## **THE AWARDS**

The Early Learning Challenge Fund would be administered as a collaboration between the U.S. Department of Education and the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The initiative incorporates two funding elements:

- ***Quality Pathways Grants***, as awards to high-capacity States pursuing models of reform and excellence in early learning. Innovative plans would already reflect significant progress toward establishing the elements of needed to improve quality and learning outcomes for children, and a desire to take such improvements to scale.
- ***Development Grants***, as awards to a population of developing States that show promise for strengthening and expanding their early learning system, but who need additional assistance to launch a standards-based, outcomes-driven system.