



Policy Matters

Setting and Measuring Benchmarks for State Policies

IMPROVING THE READINESS OF CHILDREN FOR SCHOOL

A Discussion Paper for the Policy Matters Project

POLICY MATTERS: Setting and Measuring Benchmarks for State Policies

Improving the Readiness of Children for School: Recommendations for State Policy

A DISCUSSION PAPER FOR THE *POLICY MATTERS* PROJECT

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Preface

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 This Paper

This paper presents a theoretical framework for, and recommendations regarding, policy goals and benchmarks aimed at advancing all children's readiness for school. This framework is 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. This work is 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 framework is 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.

The paper begins by reviewing what the early care and education field knows about school readiness and provides a description of the current context for school readiness policy. Next, a theoretical model that both provides a framework for considering school readiness policy and identifies policies critical to children's readiness for school is presented. As might be expected, some policy areas (e.g., children's health, parent engagement/family support, effective and ready schools, supportive communities) fall quite naturally into other *Policy Matters* papers as well. These dimensions are expressed in the policy logic model offered herein (Figure 1), while their specific policy recommendations and benchmarks are contained in other *Policy Matters* papers.² This document, therefore, contains policy specifications in nine areas germane to, but not fully inclusive of, all areas related to readiness for school. The areas included are: state-funded ECE programs; child care subsidy programs; child care tax provisions; licensing and accreditation; professional development and compensation; ECE systems development; ECE standards and assessment; facilities and capital investments; and kindergarten quality. For each of these areas, working collaboratively with an expert team, a set of specific recommendations for policy benchmarks against which to measure, compare, and track state readiness policies over time was developed.

Taken together, the policies identified present a powerful and compelling agenda for improving school readiness. This paper limits its focus to those policies more fundamental to the system of early care and education and to those with greater research evidence supporting their effectiveness. While the health, family characteristics, and economic success of families also impact children's school readiness, those policies are examined more closely in other *Policy Matters* papers. The interested reader should consult those writings as well.

Over time, the project's intent is to improve the recommendations and benchmarks, as more research and practice evidence is available. Future benchmarks may be modified to allow consistent tracking of state progress and to overcome data limitations. Thus, this paper presents a preliminary set of benchmarks. In the future, *Policy Matters* intends to assess states' progress toward meeting those benchmarks that most effectively and directly benefit families and children. It is hoped that this framework will help states to think strategically about policy decisions that improve the well-being of families.

This paper is offered as an invitation for further deliberation and action regarding policies leading to improved school readiness. It represents a beginning consensus among the experts involved in the school readiness workgroup and those who have given written and verbal feedback to the paper. In the future, through multiple and broadly inclusive discussions with state and national policymakers, administrators, practitioners, and advocates, the project hopes to expand this initial consensus to a national bi-partisan consensus on policy directions for those interested in promoting school readiness outcomes.

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.

Improving the Readiness of Children for School:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE POLICY

1 BACKGROUND: SCHOOL READINESS

School readiness is, at once, a commonly understood and profoundly misunderstood term. As a prelude to establishing a framework and set of policy goals and benchmarks for school readiness, we must delineate what readiness is and is not, how the concept has evolved, and the current context for school readiness in the United States.

Ready to Learn vs. Ready for School: Confused Constructs

Readiness today is not what it was even a decade ago. Although the concept of readiness was first discussed by Pestalozzi in 1898,³ the concept did not gain acceptance in the United States until the 1920s when it was given serious attention by the International Kindergarten Union.⁴ Since then, work related to readiness has filled the literature, much of it confounding the two distinct concepts: readiness to learn and readiness for school.⁵

The literature is filled with work regarding readiness, much of it confounding two distinct concepts: readiness to learn and readiness for school.

Advanced by leading child developmentalists, ready to learn is generally acknowledged as the developmental level at which an individual has the capacity to undertake learning of specific material, usually the age at which the average group of

individuals achieves the specified capacity.⁶ While beliefs regarding precisely which forces affect readiness to learn vary widely,⁷ there is agreement, from this perspective, that readiness is squarely situated in the domains of physical development, intellectual ability, and emotional maturity and health. By contrast, readiness

for school is a more finite construct, typically embracing specific cognitive and linguistic skills, and often associated with children's reading readiness.⁸ It is regarded as a fixed standard of physical, intellectual, and social development that enables children to meet school requirements and assimilate curriculum.⁹

These two constructs—ready to learn and ready for school—differ greatly. The former applies to students of all ages, the latter primarily to young children prior to or at the kindergarten level. In the former, readiness is fostered; in the latter, it is expected. A third construct, maturational readiness, evolves from these two. It accepts the metric of school readiness—that it is correct to expect children to achieve a specified standard prior to school entry. It also accepts the metric of children's individual time-clocks, more closely associated with developmental theory. Maturational readiness says that because all children do not develop at the same pace and because the content of schooling is fixed, not all children are ready for school at the same chronological age. Advanced by Gesell¹⁰ (and others), and quite popular in its time, maturational readiness proclaimed the need to assess children to determine their readiness for school, and when necessary, give them the “gift of time” to develop before their enrollment in school.

More recently, however, these understandings of readiness have been challenged, and new formulations about the relationship between learning and development have emerged. No longer considering development a prerequisite for learning (as did the maturationists), readiness revisionists suggest that learning and development are intertwined. As Vygotsky notes, children are ever-ready learners and grow into the intellectual life around them, so that development is stimulated by learning and is not a prerequisite for it.¹¹

Goals 2000: Heightening the School Readiness Debate

Although school readiness has been an aim of Head Start and other early childhood programs for decades,¹² school readiness moved more visibly onto the national agenda in 1989 when President Bush and the nation's governors announced six national education goals, the first being: *By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.*¹³ With the advent of the six goals, a National Education Goals Panel (NEGP), composed of policy leaders, was established to monitor the nation's progress in meeting the goals. Giving rise to much activity, the goals also served as the foundation for President Clinton's and Secretary of Education Riley's Goals 2000 legislation.

The national goals and the work they incepted served as a turning point, in particular, for the school readiness agenda by moving early childhood education into the mainstream K-12 educational policy scene, by emphasizing the importance of children's early experiences to their later school success, and by prompting the

formation of the Goal 1 Resource and Technical Planning Groups to carry out the NEGP's charges surrounding readiness. The Goal 1 Resource and Technical Planning Groups made four primary contributions to the school readiness debate: (1) advancing readiness as a condition of individuals and institutions; (2) focusing on the conditions needed for children to be ready for school; (3) discerning the dimensions that constitute school readiness; and (4) highlighting the critical role of schools in school readiness. Each is discussed below.

Readiness as a Condition of Individuals and Institutions

Historically, the onus for readiness was placed primarily on the child - whether the focus was on readiness for school or readiness to learn. The NEGP Goal 1 Resource and Technical Planning Groups adopted a broadened conceptualization of readiness, in which readiness is regarded as a condition of institutions, as well as individuals.

"Readiness is understood as the match between the readiness of the child and the readiness of the environments that serve young children."

Readiness is understood as the match between the readiness of the child and the readiness of the environments that serve young children. Thus, the contemporary understanding of readiness acknowledges that the sources of readiness are not only the child's emotional, cognitive, linguistic, and social abilities, but also the contexts in which

children live and interact with adults, teachers, and other community members.¹⁴ In order to affect a child's school readiness, multiple contexts including families, schools, neighborhoods, and early childhood settings must be involved.

Readiness Conditions

Given this orientation to readiness, it is not surprising that a second contribution of the Goal 1 Resource and Technical Planning Groups was to focus on the array of contextual conditions necessary for children to be ready for school. Aided by the goals themselves, the Goal 1 Resource and Technical Planning Groups sought to build on three objectives that accompanied the goals.¹⁵

1. All children will have access to high-quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs that help prepare them for school;
2. Every parent in the United States will be a child's first teacher and devote time each day to helping his or her preschool child learn, and parents will have access to the training and support they need; and
3. Children will receive the nutrition, physical activity, and health care necessary to be prepared to learn; and, the number of low birth-weight babies will be significantly reduced through enhanced prenatal health systems.¹⁶

Using these objectives, data were collected to measure the nation's progress in creating opportunities for young children to develop and thrive prior to school entry. This emphasis shifted the focus to include inputs as well as child outcomes as measures of readiness.

The Dimensions of School Readiness

A third contribution of the Goal 1 Resource and Technical Planning Group was to clearly specify the elements or dimensions of school readiness. The Goal 1 Technical Planning Group Report, "Reconceptualizing Children's Early Learning and Development," which includes a synthesis of decades of research, offered a conceptualization that recognized the wide range of abilities and experiences upon which early learning and development rests. This work, now widely accepted and used, suggests that early development and learning embraces five dimensions: (1) physical well-being and motor development; (2) social and emotional development; (3) approaches toward learning; (4) language development; and (5) cognition and general knowledge.¹⁷ Conceptualized by an expert panel for use in policymaking, this work offers a solid definition of school readiness and its underlying dimensions.

The School's Role in Readiness

Given the importance of focusing on learning contexts and the institutions that affect early learning, the Goal 1 Resource and Technical Planning Group also sought to define precisely what a "ready school" meant. This emphasis was a necessary response to the increasingly common call for children to be ready for schools and schools to be ready for children. To clarify this call for ready schools, the NEGP convened a Ready Schools Resource Group who, drawing on previous work defining successful practices for elementary schools,¹⁸ identified keys to ready schools.¹⁹ Properties of ready schools include: smoothing the transition from home to school; striving for continuity between ECE programs and elementary schools; helping children make sense of their worlds; fostering a full commitment to the success of every child and teacher; using approaches that have been proven to raise achievement; and underscoring that schools are part of communities. Similarly, the state of North Carolina has adopted a definition of school readiness based on the image of a two-piece puzzle, where the two pieces are the condition of children as they enter school and the capacity of schools to educate all children.²⁰

Other Influences on School Readiness

The work of the NEGP was not the only force advancing the readiness agenda. Rising rates of maternal employment and a developing research base on early childhood intervention also served as critical accelerators of national attention to school readiness.

Maternal Employment

With the rush of women into the workforce, the need for out-of-home care burgeoned, as did the call to maximize children’s early learning experiences. For example, in the year 2000, there were about 24 million children under the age of six in the United States. Nearly 60 percent of these children lived in families where both parents (or the single parent) were working or in school.²¹ Mothers have entered the labor force in growing rates over the last 40 years. In 1960, 18.6 percent of married mothers with children under six were in the labor force, compared with 45.1 percent in 1980 and 59.9 percent in 2000. A similar trend has been evidenced in the last 20 years for single mothers, of whom 44.1 percent were in the labor force in 1980, 52.2 percent in 1994, and 69.1 percent in 2000.²² There has been a particularly large increase in working mothers of very young children. In 1975, 34 percent of mothers with a child under three were employed, with almost double the number (61 percent) employed in 2000.²³ Social scientists offer different explanations for these employment trends, including: work requirements imposed on welfare recipients, the eroding wages of men, women’s response to the growing risk of divorce, women’s career aspirations, and modern-day materialism.²⁴ Regardless of the reason for this demographic change, increasing rates of maternal employment transform children’s day-to-day care arrangements.

Along with this growth in maternal employment, “a dramatic reapportioning of care” away from parents to a variety of other caregivers has been seen.²⁵ Among all children from birth to age five who have not yet entered kindergarten, only 38

“Growing rates of maternal employment have made increased availability of ECE services and early childhood education imperative.”

percent are cared for solely by their parents. Thus, the majority of children from birth to five receive care in a variety of settings, including: center-based programs (20 percent); relative care (15 percent); non-relative care (11 percent); Head Start (3 percent); and multiple arrangements other than parental care (13 percent).²⁶ Three- and four-year-old children are

more likely than infants and toddlers to be in non-parental care, specifically in center care. Yet, rates of center care for infants and toddlers have tripled in the last 20 years.²⁷ Clearly, growing rates of maternal employment have made increased availability of ECE services and early childhood education imperative.

Recent Research

Recent research augments the press for school readiness as it has illustrated the importance of early brain development, the potential cost-savings associated with high-quality early interventions, and the learning gap between poor and more affluent children.

- Early brain research has established that the way the human brain develops during the first years of life has a significant impact on later learning and intellectual growth, and that brain development during this period is quite susceptible to environmental influence - including the kind of care and stimulation that children receive both at home and in out-of-home settings.²⁸
- Research on quality early childhood interventions and care has provided evidence that one way to better prepare all children for kindergarten is to offer school readiness skills in high-quality settings.²⁹ This approach has been demonstrated to be cost-effective, producing far greater gains for society than the original cost of the investment,³⁰ and thereby providing an economic incentive to invest early in children's lives.
- Research on children entering kindergarten has found that family risk factors (e.g., low maternal education, welfare dependency, single parenthood, and

"One way to better prepare all children for kindergarten is to offer school readiness skills in high-quality settings."

parents who speak a primary language other than English) are associated with lower proficiency in early reading, math, and general knowledge.³¹ This is consistent with earlier findings that low-income children are, on a probabilistic basis, less likely to arrive at school ready³² and are more likely to be educationally disadvantaged or have difficulty in

school.³³ For many policymakers, this learning gap upon school entry indicates a need to intervene earlier in children's lives.

Together, these research findings fuel the growing press for attention to school readiness.

Current School Readiness Policy Context

2 POLICY CONTEXT

Concern about young children and their school readiness has given rise to numerous policies often with unintended policy consequences. Federal and state policymaking is increasingly focused on young children and families. The federal government now invests about \$17.3 billion annually in ECE, much of it to support low-income children and families.³⁴ These funds are appropriated for a broad set of programs related to ECE. In fiscal year 2002, major ECE programs included: Child Care and Development Block Grant (\$4.82 billion); Head Start (\$6.54 billion); Child and

“The federal government now invests about \$17.3 billion annually in early care and education.”

Adult Care Food Program (\$1.74 billion); Dependent care tax credit (\$2.7 billion); preschool grants and early intervention programs (\$807 million); Title I preschool (\$200 million); apprenticeships for child care workers (\$650,000); campus based child care (\$25 million); Early Learning Opportunities Act (\$25 million); child care provider loan forgiveness

(\$1 million); Early Reading First (\$75 million); early childhood educator professional development (\$15 million); and the U.S. Military Child Development Program (\$357 million).³⁵

Recent federal legislation has focused policy attention on young children and their families. Significant examples include: (1) the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA); (2) the State Child Health Insurance Program (SCHIP); (3) the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF); (4) dramatic

increases in funding for Head Start; and (5) the recent passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Many of these policies provide funding mechanisms that states can use to impact the contexts in which children's school readiness develops - early childhood education systems, schools, families, and communities.

A major theme of these pieces of legislation is the devolution of decision making to states. The legislation offers states considerable flexibility, new policy options, increased decision making power, and access to new funding streams, as well as incentives to develop strategies to help families move to greater economic security with access to health care and child care. In return, most programs include a strong focus on program and policy accountability that requires states to attend to and chronicle children's progress, as well as establish accountability systems.

State appropriations that support readiness have also grown. A major source of this increase over the 1990's is the expansion in state pre-kindergarten initiatives, which grew by nearly \$1 billion, from approximately \$700 million in 1991-1992 to nearly \$1.7 billion in 1998-1999.³⁶ In the years between 1998 and 2000, it has been estimated that state spending on child development and family support efforts increased by 87 percent.³⁷ In addition, states have begun to increase spending on programs for infants and toddlers, parenting education, community health, and comprehensive early childhood systems.³⁸

Current Challenges for School Readiness Policy

Despite the recent attention to and growth in federal and state initiatives to improve school readiness, there are serious complications and crises within our current system of services to young children and families. These include: (1) a crisis in definition; (2) a crisis in quality; (3) a crisis in coordination; and (4) tremendous state-to-state variation.

Ambiguity in the Definitions of Care and Education

Historically, publicly and privately funded programs for young children have been conceptualized as two different forms of services: (1) child care programs, and (2) nursery school or preschool programs. Child care programs were traditionally defined as those targeted to low-income children to allow poor mothers to work, while nursery schools were developed in order to provide educational enrichment for middle- and upper-class children prior to their entry into school.³⁹ Later, the concept of highly enriched programs for low-income and otherwise at-risk students took hold (e.g., Head Start). More recently, there has been a strong movement toward providing universal pre-kindergarten. These historical and contemporary distinctions between child care and education have resulted in separate programs, funding

streams, and definitions, that fail to acknowledge the significant overlap that exists between caring and educating in any high quality program for young children. Indeed, quality ECE programs are more alike than their program titles suggest.

For this report, the focus is on the entire system of “early care and education,” (ECE) which is defined as all forms of care and education services provided to young children ages birth to five, within a public or private setting. This nomenclature suggests support for the evolution of a comprehensive and linked set of services for children, used at parental discretion, which will advance early development and school readiness. Yet, at times, it is necessary to consider specific policies related to particular programs or sectors of care. Therefore, for clarity, the terms used in this report are defined as follows:

- **Early care and education (ECE)**– the entire system of care and education services provided to young children prior to school entry.
- **Child care**– care and education services primarily funded through federal child care funds, TANF funds, or parent fees for service to children from birth through kindergarten age, usually full-day programs.
- **Preschool programs**– programs for three- and four-year-old children, regardless of funding stream.
- **Child development programs**– care and education programs for infants and toddlers (ages 0-3), regardless of funding stream.
- **Pre-kindergarten (pre-K)**– state-funded preschool programs for three-and four-year-old children.
- **Head Start**– comprehensive child development program for preschool age children funded by the federal government or through state supplements to Head Start.
- **Early Head Start**– care and education program for infants and toddlers funded by the federal government or through state supplements to Early Head Start.
- **Family child care**– child care that takes place in the home of a child care provider.

Crisis in Quality

High-quality ECE programs can offer a good start in life by helping children engage in relatively complex play, socialize comfortably with adults and other children, and develop important physical, language, and cognitive skills.⁴⁰ Yet, sadly, a growing body of research has established that few children in the U.S. are enrolled in the kind of quality programs that boost their chances for later success in school and life. One four-state study found that seven in ten centers provided mediocre care, and one in eight was so inadequate that it threatened the health and safety of children.⁴¹ In family child care, a domain often overlooked by policymakers and the public, the situation is no better. Like child care centers, quality can vary. But overall, the

percentage of programs judged to be of substandard quality ranges from 13 percent of regulated family child care homes to 50 percent of unregulated homes.⁴²

This crisis in quality stems both from a lack of sufficient funding and from an insufficient infrastructure that is unable to support a system of quality ECE.⁴³ Essential elements of this infrastructure include: parent information and engagement; professional development and licensing; facility licensing, licensing enforcement, and program accreditation; funding and financing; and governance, planning, and accountability. Gaps in this infrastructure are evident in the current “non-system” of early care and education. For example, regarding professional development, in 30

“Few children in the U.S. are enrolled in the kind of quality programs that boost their chances for later success in school and life.”

states, child care providers are not required to hold any certificate or degree or complete special training before beginning work with young children. Seven more states require extremely minimal annual training, between six and 20 hours total. The average salary of a child care worker in the U.S. is \$16,980.⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, staff turnover rates of 35 percent are common. Many centers

and family child care homes are not linked to other community services, including health, parent education, and social services. Ongoing training is sporadic and of uneven quality. Although there are no current estimates of the percentage of regulated centers, a decade old study found that about 40 percent of center-based programs were legally exempt from regulations.⁴⁵ Of family child care providers, as many as 80 percent to 90 percent are not regulated and have no contact with regulatory or supportive agencies.⁴⁶ To make matters worse, parents often pay large percentages of their weekly wages for child care, while ECE staff forego wages, parents forego quality, and children forego opportunities.⁴⁷

Lack of Coordination

Since the U.S. has no unified national policy for young children and families, a wide assortment of services and programs has developed at the federal, state, and local

“There are countless overlaps and gaps in policy, funding streams, eligibility, fees, programming, and other crucial matters.”

levels. This “welter of diverse policy aims, target groups, and service strategies is unacceptably inefficient and wasteful, especially when resources are scarce.”⁴⁸

In addition, there are countless overlaps and gaps in policy, funding streams, eligibility, fees, programming, and other crucial matters. This crisis in coordination results in some families receiving fragmented and

inconsistent services, while other eligible families fall through the cracks and receive no services whatsoever. In addition, the field routinely competes for providers, space, and children.

To address this crisis in coordination, some state and local governments have created governance and planning entities that have made notable progress in linking early childhood services with health and other social services, streamlining service delivery, and increasing programmatic efficiency. Yet, a recent report on coordination of services by the Children's Defense Fund argues that, without new resources, coordination alone will not be able to increase the number, kind, or quality of ECE services.⁴⁹ In fact, in many cases these local governance and planning entities are idiosyncratic, politically fragile and, in many cases, dependent on short-term philanthropic or corporate support.⁵⁰

Tremendous State-to-State Variation

Fueled by a policy ethos that supports policy devolution, recent legislation has increased the variation among states in their programs and policies for young children and families. A recent comparison of state early childhood policies published by *Education Week* found significant variation on nearly every critical variable, including: access, funding levels, program standards, teacher quality, and school readiness assessment.⁵¹ For example, among the 27 states that fund a child and dependent care tax credit for families, the maximum credit for families with one dependent child (in 2001) ranged from \$144 to \$792.⁵² States also vary in the provision of state pre-kindergarten programs. Forty-one states fund such programs, but only one state is implementing a truly universal program for all four-year-olds, regardless of family income. Other states fund programs for three- and/or four-year-old children, with varying eligibility requirements, lengths of day, program structures, teacher qualifications, and funding levels. Funding per enrolled child ranges from \$986 to \$7,845 per child. State policies regarding licensing and regulation also vary. For example, in some states, exemptions from licensing are allowed for religious centers; in others, exemptions are allowed for nursery schools, preschools, or pre-K. Requirements for teacher training and education also vary by state. Most states do not require any level of formal education for providers in child care centers or family homes, although some states require education or training for teachers in specific programs (e.g., state pre-K program).⁵³

This variation in state efforts in ECE is problematic. States and communities with more wealth are able to, and do, invest more in children's services. This leaves poor

"Not only is access unequal, but even for those children who receive services, quality is highly varied."

states and communities, often where the need is greatest, without services—a case of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. This wide variation among states means that service access is unequal, fueling later educational inequities. Not only is access unequal, but even for those

children who receive services, quality is highly varied, adding to differentials in the nature of the experiences the NEGP thought so critical to enhance all children's readiness for school.

A Theoretical Framework for School Readiness Policy

3 Assumptions Underlying the Policy Logic Model

The remainder of this paper offers a framework for the “children ready for school” (school readiness) policy cluster. First, the paper clarifies the assumptions that shape the conception of both school readiness and the linkages between school readiness and state policy choices. Then, the design and terminology used in the “policy logic model” are presented. Next, a policy logic model is explicated, mapping essential correlates to the result: children are ready for school. Lastly, using the policy logic model, nine policy areas critical to the school readiness result are identified. For each policy area, policy features and options from which state policymakers may choose are presented. It is these policy options that state policies will be compared to assess state efforts to promote school readiness, both between states and within the same state over time.

- Readiness is a crucial construct that applies to all children, prenatal to age five, not only those below the poverty line.
- Readiness does not reside solely in the child, but is a condition of the environments in which children find themselves—families, early childhood settings, schools, neighborhoods, and communities. Early childhood settings include both formal and informal child care and pre-school contexts.
- Readiness includes multiple dimensions and is not solely the purview of the cognitive domain. Readiness embraces five dimensions: physical and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches toward learning; language, literacy, and communication skills; and cognitive skills.

- A state’s school readiness policy consists of a wide range of policy choices within multiple systems (e.g., health, welfare, and education) and includes both direct services to children and families and the infrastructure in which these services are provided.
- Because the care and education of young children cannot be separated, all high-quality programs for young children must acknowledge and incorporate both functions into their services.

Design and Terminology Used in the Policy Logic Model

Consistent with current policy ethos, the Policy Matters project is results oriented. It seeks to state a result clearly and to “backward map” the conceptual linkages between the desired result and the specific state policy choices whose cumulative effects produce this result. In total, this provides a “policy logic model.”

Within the policy logic model, each result is linked to outcomes that, in turn, are linked to indicators. For each indicator, policy areas that contribute to the indicator, as well as policy features for each policy area are specified. Finally, for each policy feature, a set of mutually exclusive policy options on which to compare state policies aimed at promoting school readiness is presented. For each policy feature, one “goal” policy option and one “benchmark” policy option is identified.

“Children Ready for School”: Policy Logic Model

Using the terminology previously described, Figure 1 presents a specific policy logic model for the school readiness result and associated outcomes, indicators, and policy areas. The result and four outcomes central to this policy logic model are described. Then, for each outcome, two indicators and areas of state policies associated with each indicator are described. In the next section, for each policy area, the most salient policy features and an associated continuum of policy options states may choose are noted.

Result

This policy logic model focuses on the result: *All children are ready for school.*

Outcomes

In this policy logic model, four outcomes operationally define the school readiness result: (1) ready systems of early care and education (ECE); (2) ready schools; (3) ready families; and (4) ready communities. These outcomes are focused on the contexts in which young children grow, learn, and develop and the degree to which these contexts are “ready” for the young children with whom they come into contact. School readiness rests on the readiness of each of these contexts and cannot be assured by focusing on only one context or on children alone. This paper presents each

outcome along with two measurable indicators and one or more areas of state policy linked to each indicator.

Outcome 1: Ready Systems of ECE

In the policy logic model, a “ready system of ECE” is an outcome on which school readiness depends. The concept of a ready system is operationalized by considering two indicators. The first indicator, families have access to a variety of ECE programs for their young children, considers the provision of ECE services in a variety of settings for children from birth to age five. For this indicator, three policy areas are identified: (1) state-funded programs; (2) child care subsidy programs; and (3) child care tax provisions. The second indicator of a ready system of ECE, ECE programs are supported by an infrastructure that ensures high-quality programs for children, focuses on infrastructure and quality enhancements. For this indicator, five policy areas associated with the establishment of an infrastructure to support quality ECE programs are examined: (1) licensing and accreditation; (2) professional development and compensation; (3) ECE systems development (which includes governance, continuity, and outreach); (4) ECE standards and assessment; and (5) facilities/capital investment.

Outcome 2: Ready Schools

In order for young children to thrive and be ready for school, schools must acknowledge the unique learning needs of young children. What works for fifth- or sixth-graders will not work for kindergartners, so schools must take specific steps to ensure that they are ready to promote young children’s formal learning. In this policy logic model, ready schools are operationalized by considering two indicators. The first indicator, children have access to high-quality early school experiences, focuses on the learning process children experience in their kindergarten classrooms. For this indicator, a general policy area of kindergarten quality is considered. The second indicator, schools are coordinated with and linked to other services for children and families, considers linkages between schools and families, as well as between schools and other service providers. Policies for this indicator are included in the policy area: ECE systems development (introduced in the previous section).

Outcome 3: Ready Families

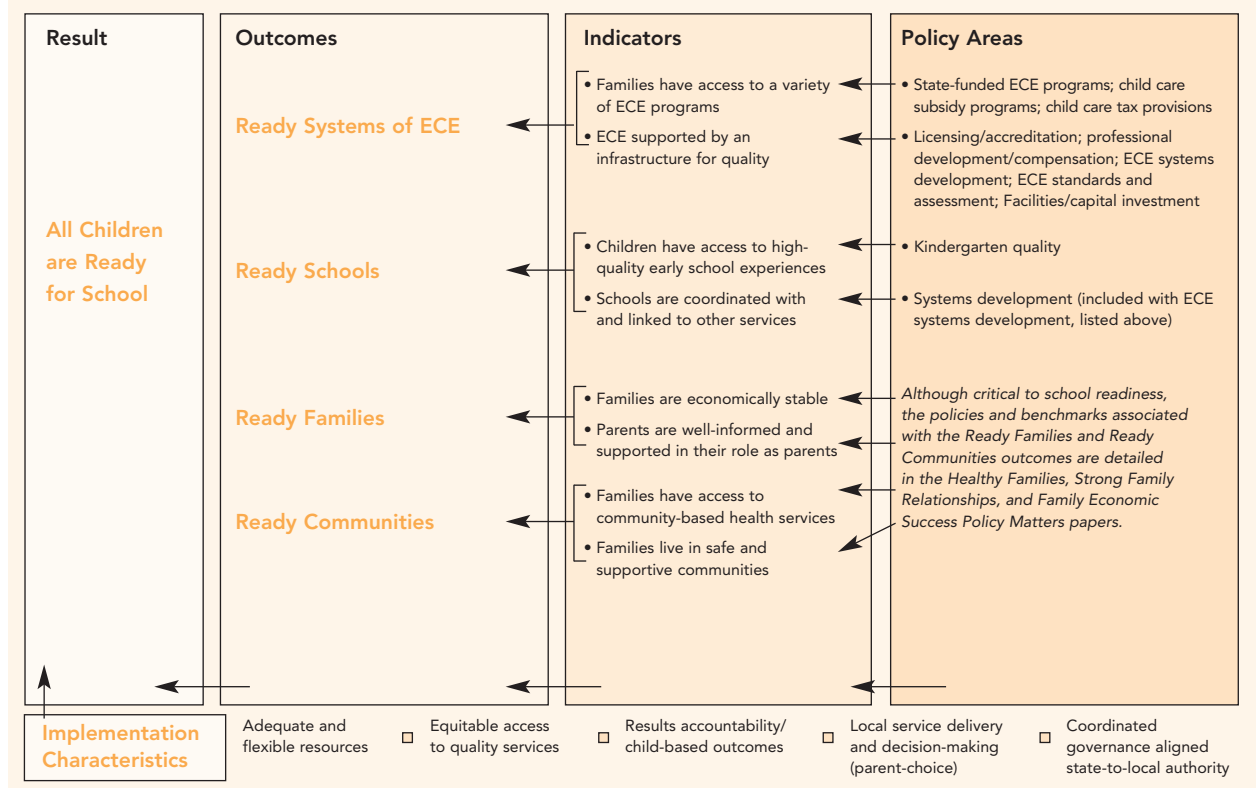
Due to the critical role of families in shaping children’s lives and future outcomes, characteristics of families are key determinants of children’s school readiness. In the policy logic model, two indicators of family well-being and readiness are considered. The first indicator, families are economically stable, considers poverty and the associated policies that aim to decrease the poverty rate and make work pay for low-income families. The second indicator, parents are well-informed and supported in their role as parents, focuses on all parents’ access to information and supports needed as they raise their children. Although these indicators are directly tied to school

readiness, another Policy Matters paper focuses exclusively on family economic success. For this reason, policy areas, policy options, goals and benchmarks are not specified in this area.

Outcome 4: Ready Communities

Communities in which children grow and develop impact their school readiness through access to institutional resources, as well as through the provision of safe and supportive neighborhoods. Another critical aspect of ready communities is coordinated governance and local decision making regarding programs for young children and their families. Two indicators of ready communities are identified. The first, families have access to community-based health services, considers the important role of preventive care, treatment, prenatal and mental health services, as well as access to nutrition programs that reduce food insecurity for lower-income families. The second indicator, families live in safe and supportive communities, considers crime and exposure rates, housing stock quality, and the supply of institutional resources such as libraries and parks. Despite the importance of these policies for school readiness, they are being considered in two other *Policy Matters* papers: “Improving the Health of Families” and “Supporting Strong Family Relationships”. For this reason, the policy model does not identify specific policy features, policy options, goals and benchmarks for these indicators.

Figure 1. Children Ready for School Policy Logic Model



Preliminary School Readiness Policies and Benchmarks

4 HOW THE PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS AND BENCHMARKS WERE ESTABLISHED

The policy logic model leads to a focus on nine policy areas critical to the school readiness result: (1) State-funded programs; (2) child care subsidy programs; (3) child care tax provisions; (4) licensing/accreditation; (5) professional development and compensation; (6) ECE systems development; (7) ECE standards and assessment; (8) facilities and capital investment; and (9) Kindergarten quality.⁵⁴ For each policy area, based on valuable advice and feedback from an expert team convened for this project,⁵⁵ the most promising policy features for the school readiness result were identified.

For each policy feature, a set of policy options presented on a continuum of mutually exclusive policy choices state policymakers may choose is identified. These policy options are listed from the most desirable to the least desirable. It is from among the more desirable policy options that a goal (the optimal policy level) is identified. This goal level appears in italic type. The recommendation of this report is that states set their school readiness policies at the optimal level. By meeting these goal levels, states would be putting the pieces in place to fund and coordinate a system of ECE characterized by quality, availability, affordability, and continuity.

Although it is desirable for all states to have policies in place to meet each of these goals, it is acknowledged that there is a need for an intermediary measure for some policy features that would allow states to measure their progress against a standard

that is more easily achieved. To address this reality, for each set of policy options, one policy option is identified as the benchmark. This benchmark is listed in bold. In many cases, a policy option served both as the goal and the benchmark. In those cases, this policy option is listed in both bold and italic type. It is anticipated that by identifying both the goal and benchmark levels, a means to measure, compare, and evaluate states' school readiness policies over time is provided.

Description of Specific Policies

For each of the nine policy areas, a brief rationale and list of key policy features is presented. A table listing the range of policy options states may choose for each feature, as well as the optimal policy option (in italic) and the benchmark (in bold) for that policy feature, is included. These recommendations were developed with the advice of a team of experts and are informed by a rich research base and knowledge of “best practices” in state policies and programs. It is noted, however, that this set of policies, features, options, goals, and benchmarks has not been field-tested to assess the feasibility of collecting this data or the validity of these measures. Only through a piloting process will it be possible to assess fully how accurately the project defined the universe of policy options. In addition, over time it will be necessary to revise these policy options, goals, and benchmarks in order to account for state innovation and national developments in school readiness policy.

It is also acknowledged that, although these nine policy areas are presented as distinct areas, there are important interactions between state policy choices within and across policy areas. It may be, for example, that significant attention in one policy area reduces the need for intense attention in others. Moreover, it is critical to underscore that no single policy choice offers a “silver bullet” that will compensate for a lack of policy effort in other areas. In other words, action in each of the policy areas is essential, yet each state will craft the appropriate balance of efforts across the policy areas, taking into consideration what already exists and the unique needs of children and families in the state.

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 polled stated that finding affordable quality child care is difficult.⁵⁶ Confirming the situation, a U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) study found that the supply was sufficient to meet only 16 percent of the demand for infant care and 23 percent of the demand for preschool care.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ State policies can help alleviate this challenge. Indeed, without state investments, families' access to ECE programs for their children would be even

more limited. 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. Accordingly, a second dimension (per enrolled child) that considers the amount of investment per child actually enrolled is presented. 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 (e.g., eligibility) is presented as described below and in Table 1.

1.1 Per Capita Preschool Investment. Although federal child care subsidies and Head Start programs provide important subsidies for ECE services, these programs do not meet the full need for assistance. For example, nationally, only one in seven families eligible for child care subsidies is receiving assistance,⁵⁹ and despite nearly 35 years of investment in Head Start, the program still serves only about three out of five eligible children.⁶⁰ To address these needs, it is recommended that the total amount of state investment in provision of programs for preschoolers (3- and 4-year-olds) equal 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 a part-day program that fails to meet the needs of parents who work full-time.⁶¹ Others are not funded at a level that allows for the provision of a quality preschool experience for the children in the program. It is recommended that states 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. Determining who is eligible for preschool programs is a critical policy decision. It is recommended that states 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. A comprehensive readiness policy must concern itself not only with 3- and 4-year-old children, but also with infants and toddlers. Yet, studies show that parents' choices are particularly restricted by limited availability of and long waiting lists for infant and toddler care.⁶² Data indicate, for example, that states spend over \$1 billion on preschool programs, but only \$226 million on programs to promote the well-being of infants and toddlers.⁶³ To address this need, it is recommended that the overall amount of state investment in programs for infants and toddlers (0-3 years of age) equal at least \$500 per 0-3-year-old in the state.

1.5 Per Child Investment in Programs for Infants and Toddlers. In order to provide high-quality infant and toddler care, programs must be funded at an adequate level. The state funding level recommended per enrolled child is \$10,000 - \$15,000 to fund quality infant and toddler child development services or \$5,000 - \$7,500 per enrolled child to fund half-day, quality infant and toddler child development services.

1.6 Program Eligibility for Infants and Toddlers. It is recommended that states 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.

Table 1: State-funded ECE Programs - Policy Features and Options

KEY POLICY FEATURE	POLICY OPTIONS
<p>1.1 Per capita investment of state funds invested in provision of programs for 3- and 4- year-olds</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State invests at least \$500 per 3- or 4-year old child • State invests between \$250 and \$500 per 3- or 4-year-old • State invests between \$100 and \$250 per 3- or 4-year-old • State invests less than \$100 per 3- or 4-year-old <p>FORMULA: (state investment in pre-K program + state supplement to Head Start + state child care investments for 3- and 4-year-old children)/state population of 3- and 4-year-old children</p>

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Table 1 (cont'd): State-Funded ECE Programs - Policy Features and Options

KEY POLICY FEATURE	POLICY OPTIONS
<p>1.2 Per child investment in pre-K is sufficient to support quality pre-kindergarten programs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total expenditures per enrolled preschooler are at least \$12,000 for a full-school-day program OR at least \$6,000 for a half-school day program • Total expenditures per enrolled preschooler are between \$8,000 and \$12,000 for a full school day program OR between \$4,000 and \$6,000 for a half-school day program • Total expenditures per enrolled preschooler are between \$6,000 and \$8,000 for a full school day program OR between \$3,000 and \$4,000 for a half-school day program • Total expenditures per enrolled preschooler are less than \$6,000 for a full school day program OR less than \$3,000 for a half-school day program
<p>1.3 Preschool eligibility allows access for all three-and four-year-old children</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All 3- and 4-year old children are eligible for state pre-K program and/or Head Start • All 3- and 4-year old children with identified child/family risk factors are eligible for state pre-K and/or state supplements Head Start program • All 4-year-old children are eligible for state pre-K program and/or Head Start • Only 4-year-olds with identified child/family risk factors are eligible for state pre-K program and/or Head Start • State does not provide preschool program or supplement Head Start
<p>1.4 Per capita investment in provision of child development programs for infants and toddlers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State invests at least \$500 per 0-3-year-old • State invests between \$250 and \$500 per 0-3-year-old • State invests between \$100 and \$250 per 0-3-year-old • State invests less than \$100 per 0-3-year-old <p>FORMULA: (state investment in provision of infant and toddler care + state supplement to Early Head Start + state child care investments for children 0-3-year olds/state population of 0-3-year-olds)</p>
<p>1.5 Per child investment in child development programs for infants and toddlers is sufficient to support quality programs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total expenditures per enrolled infant or toddler are at least \$15,000 for a full-school day program OR at least \$7,500 for a half school day program • Total expenditures per enrolled infant or toddler are between \$10,000 and \$15,000 for a full school day program OR between \$5,000 and \$7,500 for a half-school day program • Total expenditures per enrolled infant or toddler are between \$7,500 and \$10,000 for a full school day program OR between \$3,750 and \$5,000 for a half-school day program • Total expenditures per enrolled infant or toddler are less than \$7,500 for a full school day program OR less than \$3,750 for a half-school day program

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Table 1 (cont'd): State-Funded ECE Programs - Policy Features and Options

KEY POLICY FEATURE	POLICY OPTIONS
1.6 Program eligibility for infants and toddlers (e.g., Early Head Start)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>State funds early intervention and child development programs for all 0-3-year-olds</i> • State funds early intervention and child development programs 0-3-year-olds with identified child/family risk factors • State only funds early intervention program • State does not fund any child development program for infants and toddlers
1.7 Parental choice through public support of diverse delivery system that utilizes existing community resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>State encourages provision of pre-kindergarten and child development programs in public schools, center-based programs of all types, (e.g., child care centers, Head Start, nursery schools, private schools, regardless of corporate type) and family child care homes</i> • State only encourages provision of pre-kindergarten and child development programs in public schools and center-based programs. • State only encourages provision of pre-kindergarten and child development programs in public schools

NOTE ON POLICY OPTIONS:

Italicized Policy Option = Goal Policy Level (Optimal & Recommended)

Bold Policy Option = Benchmark Level (Intermediary Progress Step)

Policy 2: Child Care Subsidies

As already discussed, it is difficult for parents to find affordable ECE. This is particularly problematic for low-income working families, for whom child care expenses constitute a significant percentage of their earnings. 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 (six percent as opposed to 16 percent paid by lower income families).⁶⁴

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.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶

Table 2 considers states' child care subsidy policies and recommended policy features and benchmarks.

- 2.1 TANF Investments in ECE.** Existing policy permits the use of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) dollars for child care as a supplement to CCDF funds. In fact, 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 among the states.⁶⁷ In order to measure investments of TANF funds in child care, this analysis divides the amount of state investment by the number of children ages 0-5 in the state. The recommended state investment is at least \$500 in TANF funds per 0-5-year-old to provide or enhance availability of ECE services.
- 2.2 Subsidy Income Eligibility.** Eligibility for subsidies is an essential policy feature that determines which families are eligible for support as they move off of welfare or into higher paying jobs. Currently, states vary considerably in where they set their eligibility levels, ranging from 122 percent to 325 percent of the federal poverty level.⁶⁸ 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.** Currently, the cost of quality care and education exceeds the reimbursement rates established by most states.⁶⁹ To ensure equal access to ECE programs, states should set rates based on the level that would allow parents to choose any provider in their community, including the highest quality level. 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.** There are gaps in the supply of child care services in situations where demand for child care of a special type, at certain time, or in certain locations is thin. Shortages exist in low-income and rural communities, and for infants, children with special needs, and children needing care at night and on weekends.⁷⁰ In addition, higher quality care is more expensive to provide.⁷¹ 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.⁷² For most low-income working families, the cost of quality care is prohibitive.⁷³ Although subsidy programs reduce the cost to families, some states charge large parent co-pays that are burdensome to families in need of assistance. A review of state policies by the Children’s Defense Fund found that thirty-seven states currently maintain parent co-payments at ten percent or less of family income for families up to 150 percent of the federal poverty level. Yet, only four states charge no co-pay to a family of three at the federal poverty level.⁷⁴ All states should make child care affordable by keeping parent co-pays for child care (irrespective of the number of children in care) below ten percent of family income. In addition, families below the poverty line should pay no co-pay at all.

2.6 Eligibility Re-determination. To make subsidies and child care easily accessible and less burdensome, states should require eligibility re-determination no more than once per year and allow families to 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.⁷⁵ Despite the importance of these programs, many states do not extend child care subsidy eligibility to parents in college or job training programs.⁷⁶ This lack of child care assistance is a major barrier to continued participation in educational or job training programs.⁷⁷ Given this evidence, states should make subsidies available to parents participating in post-secondary education and job training programs in order to support families in their efforts to move into employment and economic security.

Table 2: Child Care Subsidies - Policy Features and Options

KEY POLICY FEATURE	POLICY OPTIONS
<p>2.1 Use of state TANF allocation invested in provision of child care for low- and moderate-income families</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State invests at least \$500 per 0-5-year-old • State invests between \$250 and \$500 per 0-5-year-old • State invests between \$100 and \$250 per 0-5-year-old • State invests less than \$100 per 0-5-year-old <p>FORMULA: [(% of TANF funds transferred to CCDF x total TANF allocation) + TANF dollars spent directly on child care - TANF dollars spent on school age child care/state population of 0-5-year-olds]</p>

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Table 2 (Cont'd): Child Care Subsidies - Policy Features and Options

KEY POLICY FEATURE	POLICY OPTIONS
<p>2.2 Subsidy eligibility criteria enable families who need help to receive it</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State legally guarantees child care assistance for families up to 100% of state median income (SMI) • State legally guarantees child care assistance for families up to 85 % of SMI • State legally guarantees child care assistance for families up to 75 % of SMI • All families are eligible for child care assistance up to 100% SMI • All families are eligible for child care assistance up to 85% SMI • State sets eligibility level between 75% and 85% of SMI • State sets eligibility level at less than 75% of SMI
<p>2.3 Subsidy payment rate is adequate</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximum payment rate set at or above the 100th percentile of the market rate based on a market rate survey that is determined no less than every two years and indexed each year. Rates reflect ages of children • Maximum payment rate set between the 75th and 99th percentile of the market rate based on a market rate survey that is determined no less than every two years and indexed each year. Rates reflect ages of children • Maximum payment rate set at the 75th percentile of the market rate based on a market rate survey that is determined no less than every two years and indexed each year. Rates reflect ages of children • Maximum payment rate set below the 75th percentile of the market rate based on a market rate survey that is determined no less than every two years and indexed each year. Rates reflect ages of children
<p>2.4 Additional payments are used to promote both high quality care and care for special populations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional payments are provided due to the higher cost of providing the following types of care: (1) higher quality care; (2) care for children with special needs; (3) care for children at risk/in low-income communities; (4) children in rural areas; and (5) odd-hour care • Additional payments are provided for at least three of the above types of care • Additional payments are provided for one or two of the above types of care • No additional payments are provided

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Table 2 (cont'd): Child Care Subsidies - Policy Features and Options

KEY POLICY FEATURE	POLICY OPTIONS
<p>2.5 Family co-payments are reasonable for families of various income levels</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No family's co-pay is more than 7% of family income for all children in their family, irrespective of the number of children in care, AND no co-pay is charged to families below the poverty line • No family's co-pay is more than 10% of family income for all children in their family, irrespective of the number of children in care, AND no co-pay is charged to families below the poverty line • No family's co-pay is more than 7% of family income, irrespective of the number of children in care, but a co-pay is charged to families below the poverty line • No family's co-pay is more than 10% of family income, irrespective of the number of children in care, but a co-pay is charged to families below the poverty line • No family's co-pay is more than 20% of family income, irrespective of the number of children in care • Family's co-pay can be more than 20% of family income for all children in care
<p>2.6 Eligibility re-determination for child care subsidies is not overly burdensome on families</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eligibility re-determination is required no more than once a year, with phone and mail applications available • Eligibility re-determination is required no more than once a year without phone or mail applications available • No more than twice a year eligibility re-determination with phone and mail applications available • No more than twice a year eligibility re-determination without phone or mail applications available • Eligibility re-determination is required more than twice a year
<p>2.7 Subsidies are available to parents in post-secondary education or job training programs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-income parents enrolled in 2-year colleges, 4-year colleges, or job training programs are eligible for child care assistance • Low-income parents enrolled in only one or two of the above education programs are eligible for child care assistance • Low-income parents are only eligible if working (and the state's definition of work does not include job training or education)

NOTE ON POLICY OPTIONS:
Italicized Policy Option = Goal Policy Level (Optimal & Recommended)
Bold Policy Option = Benchmark Level (Intermediary Progress Step)

Policy 3: Child Care Tax Provisions

As discussed, child care expenses can create significant burdens on families, particularly low-income families.⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹ Although not a direct subsidy to families (as in Policy 2), these provisions can provide a tax write-off or credit to reimburse families for some of their child care expenses during the tax year. Although quite similar to direct payment subsidies, tax provisions allow for an entitlement for child care assistance, since tax breaks are not limited by yearly appropriations.⁸⁰ In addition, tax provisions may be less stigmatizing to lower-income families and easier to gain political support for than direct payments through the subsidy program.⁸¹

State child care tax policy should be comprised of several features or decisions.⁸²

3.1 Amount of State Child and Dependent Care Tax Provision. Although not a direct expenditure of state funds, the forgone revenue lost by offering a child and dependent care tax provision is an important form of state investment in ECE. Despite the fact that states do not spend funds directly on their child care tax provisions, tax provisions take money out of the treasury just as expenditures do, since a dollar given in a direct subsidy does not cost the government more or less than a dollar refunded to a parent as a tax refund.⁸³ In order to measure the size of the tax provision and its benefits to the state, the state's "forgone revenue" due to the provision is used. Another form of state investment in ECE is a state child and dependent care tax provision, often modeled after the federal provision. 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.⁸⁴ It is recommended that all states enact child care tax provisions that are completely refundable.

3.3 Value of Tax Provision. Another important policy feature is the size of the tax provision received by the family. 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 percent to ¹¹⁰ percent. It is recommended that child and

dependent tax provisions, at minimum, equal 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,⁸⁵ states should target their tax provision to provide greater benefits for low-income families. Eight states with provisions as a percentage of the federal credit target low-income families by providing such families a credit at a higher proportion of the federal credit than that offered to higher income families. Two states target their provision to low income families by allowing them to claim a higher percentage of expenses than higher income families. It is recommended that states 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 they incur expenses comparable to higher income families.⁸⁶ For states with provisions based upon the federal credit, it is recommended that they 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. 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.⁸⁷ It is recommended that states not set an income eligibility limit for child and dependent care tax provisions.

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. Twenty-two states have separate lines for child and dependent care deductions or credits. Seven states include a separate line on both the long and short tax forms. It is recommended that states include a specific line for the provision on both the short and long tax forms, where applicable.

Table 3: Child Care Tax Provisions – Policy Features and Options

KEY POLICY FEATURE	POLICY OPTIONS
<p>3.1 Overall cost to state of child care tax provision per 0-5 year old</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State forgone tax revenue is at least \$500 per 0-5-year-old • State forgone tax revenue is between \$250 and \$500 • State forgone tax revenue is between \$100 and \$250 • State forgone tax revenue is less than \$100 <p>FORMULA: [(Average tax provision/deduction received for children 0-5 years of age x number of tax provisions/deductions utilized for children 0-5 years of age)/state population of 0-5-year-old children]</p>
<p>3.2 State has a child and dependent care tax provision</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State provides a completely refundable credit for all taxpayers with children in child care • State provides a refundable credit for some taxpayers with children in child care, or only a partially refundable credit • State provides a nonrefundable credit • State provides a deduction • State does not have a provision
<p>3.3 Value of the child and dependent care tax provision is adequate</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Maximum value of provision exceeds 200% of the federal credit (more than \$4,200 in TY2003 for 2+ dependents)</i> • Maximum value of provision equals 100-200% of the federal credit (\$2,100-4,200 in TY2003 for 2+ dependents) • Maximum value of provision equals 75% - 99% of the federal credit (\$1,575 - \$2,099 for 2+ dependents) • Maximum value of provision equals 50% - 74% of the federal credit (\$1,050 - \$1,574 for 2+ dependents) • Maximum value of provision equals 25% - 49% of the federal credit (\$525 - \$1,049 for 2+ dependents) • Maximum value of provision equals less than 25% of the federal credit (less than \$525 for 2+ dependents) • State does not provide a child and dependent care tax credit provision
<p>3.4 Size of child and dependent tax provision is larger for lower income families</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision has a sliding scale better than the federal sliding scale: the lowest income families can receive over 75% more than the highest income families eligible for the provision • Provision has a sliding scale equivalent to the federal sliding scale: the lowest income families can receive 75% more than the highest income families eligible for the provision • Provision has a sliding scale worse than the federal sliding scale: the lowest income families can receive less than 75% more than the highest income families eligible for the provision • Provision has no sliding scale: the lowest income families receive the same as or less than the highest income families eligible for the provision • State does not provide a child and dependent care tax provision

Continued on page 30

Table 3 (cont'd): Child Care Tax Provisions – Policy Features and Options

KEY POLICY FEATURE	POLICY OPTIONS
<p>3.5 For provisions based on the federal credit: provision is actually available to the lowest-income families</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision is based on the federal credit without regard to federal tax liability • Provision is based on the federal credit received (and is thus limited by federal tax liability) • State does not have a child and dependent care tax provision based on the federal credit • State does not provide a child and dependent tax provision
<p>3.6 Child and dependent care tax provision is available to families at all income levels</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No income limit • Income limit is \$90,000 or higher • Income limit is between \$60,000 and \$90,000 • Income limit is between \$30,000 and \$60,000 • Income limit is below \$30,000 • State does not provide a child and dependent tax provision
<p>3.7 Child and dependent care tax provision is easy for eligible families to claim</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A specific line for the provision exists on both the short and long tax forms (where applicable) • Provision may be claimed on both short and long tax forms (where applicable) but is grouped together with other credits/is mentioned by name only in the instructions • A specific line for the provision exists on long tax form, but the provision may not be claimed on the short form (where applicable) • The provision may be claimed on the long form but not the short form (where applicable), and is grouped together with other credits/is mentioned by name only in the instructions • State does not provide a child and dependent tax provision

NOTE ON POLICY OPTIONS:
Italicized Policy Option = Goal Policy Level (Optimal & Recommended)
Bold Policy Option = Benchmark Level (Intermediary Progress Step)

Policy 4: Licensing and Accreditation

High-quality ECE results in large part from policy mandates or policy incentives, each of which is required or fostered at state discretion. Data are clear that regulations, licensing standards, and program accreditation promote and are correlated with higher-quality care.⁸⁸ However, nearly one-third of the states’ standards are low enough to allow situations that threaten children’s physical safety and healthy development.⁸⁹ Licensing ECE programs addresses this crisis in quality by establishing minimum standards for regulated dimensions of care (such as group size, teacher-to-child ratios, and staff qualifications). States with more demanding

licensing standards have been found to have fewer poor-quality centers.⁹⁰ 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.⁹¹ 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.

Specifically, ECE research and practice point to the following key policy features in this area (see Table 4):

- 4.1 Maximum Group Size.** Well-developed licensing standards establish safe group sizes for children, which vary by the age of the child in order to provide smaller groups for infants and toddlers. Group size has been found to be uniquely associated with positive caregiving.⁹² It is recommended that states 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.** Well-developed licensing standards also establish safe teacher-to-child ratios, which vary by the age of the child in order to provide more intensive adult supervision and interaction for infants and toddlers. Higher teacher-child ratios have been found to be associated with more stimulating, responsive, warm, and supportive care.⁹³ In addition, higher teacher-to-child ratios have been found to be associated with higher ratings on quality assessments and more positive child outcomes.⁹⁴ Based upon this evidence, it is recommended that states 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.⁹⁵ Caregivers who have more formal education and more specialized training pertaining to children offer care that is more stimulating, warm, and supportive.⁹⁶ Highly educated and specially trained caregivers also are more likely to organize materials and activities into a more age-appropriate environment for children.⁹⁷ It is recommended that state policies governing staff qualifications require all programs to meet the staff qualifications recommended by national associations.
- 4.4 Licensing Enforcement.** To ensure the implementation of the regulations, states must establish effective enforcement of licensing regulations for ECE providers, and such enforcement must be enacted equitably and regularly.⁹⁸ 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. For example, in most states caseload ratios exceed 100:1, with caseloads in some states reaching a ratio 200:1 for centers and 300:1 for family child care settings.⁹⁹ 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. A significant number of children spend their day in family child care arrangements.¹⁰⁰ Across states there is even more variety in state regulation of family child care than of centers - although generally standards are lower.¹⁰¹ In many states, such programs receive minimal amounts of regulation and support. Consequently, many children participate in care arrangements that state regulatory agencies know little about. One national study found that over one-third of family child care programs were rated as inadequate, which means quality was so poor that it could harm children's development.¹⁰² 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. Licensing standards establish minimum guidelines for programs that are required to be licensed. But 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.¹⁰³ 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. This policy area considers accreditation initiatives, which offer incentives for providers to meet standards much higher than the minimum licensing standards and promote the type of high-quality care that has been found to contribute to healthy child development and increased school readiness.¹⁰⁴ Seven states require their pre-K programs to be accredited.¹⁰⁵ Research has shown that centers that comply with additional standards, such as accreditation, provide better care.¹⁰⁶ States should encourage program accreditation by providing incentives and rewards to programs that achieve and maintain NAEYC or comparable accreditation.

Table 4: Licensing and Accreditation - Policy Features and Options

KEY POLICY FEATURE	POLICY OPTIONS
<p>4.1 To be licensed, child care centers must meet maximum group size standards</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State requires group size to be at or below ranges recommended by NAEYC and AAP/APHA for all ages (infants - 5) • State requires group size to be within the range recommended by NAEYC and AAP/APHA for all ages (infants - 5) • State requires group size to be within or below the range recommended by NAEYC and AAP/APHA for some age groups, but not all • State does not require group size to be within or below the range recommended by NAEYC for any age groups
<p>4.2 To be licensed, child care centers must meet minimum teacher-to-child ratio standards</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State requires teacher-to-child ratio to be at or above the top of the range recommended by NAEYC and AAP/APHA standards for all ages (infant -5) • State requires teacher-to-child ratio to be within the range recommended by NAEYC and AAP/APHA for all ages (infants - 5) • State requires teacher-to-child ratio to be within the range recommended by NAEYC and AAP/APHA for some ages, but not all • State does not require teacher-to-child ratio to be within the range recommended by NAEYC and AAP/APHA for ages 0-5
<p>4.3 To be licensed, state requires programs to meet minimum staff qualifications</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State requires all programs to meet staff qualifications specified by national professional development organizations • State requires some programs to meet minimum staff qualification standards specified above, but does not require all programs to meet these standards • State does not require any programs to meet minimum staff qualification standards specified above
<p>4.4 State requires appropriate enforcement of licensing regulations for ECE providers¹⁰⁷</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State mandates and funds licensing enforcement visits to each child care center or family child care home at least three times per year • State mandates and funds licensing visits to all child care centers or family child care homes at least two times a year • State mandates and funds licensing visits to all child care centers or family child care homes at least once a year • State mandates and funds licensing visits to all child care centers or family child care homes less than every year
<p>4.5 Regulation is required for family child care providers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulation is required for the care of one or more children in a private home (except for those in the care of an immediate family member such as a parent, guardian, step-parent, grandparent, great-grandparent, aunt, uncle, brother, or sister) • Regulation is required when three or more children are cared for in a private home by anyone other than the parents or guardians on a regular basis • No regulation required for family child care homes

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Table 4 (cont'd): Licensing and Accreditation - Policy Features and Options

KEY POLICY FEATURE	POLICY OPTIONS
<p>4.6 State does not allow exemptions from child care center regulations ¹⁰⁸</p> <p>4.7 State encourages program accreditation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State requires all center-based programs providing care on a regular basis to meet all licensing requirements • State permits exemptions from some elements of licensing for centers; however, no exemptions are made for basic health and safety regulations for any types of programs (e.g. religious programs, part-day programs, school-based programs) <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State requires NAEYC or comparable accreditation for programs that are at least 50% publicly funded • State rewards NAEYC or comparable accreditation for programs serving infants - age 5 • State promotes NAEYC or comparable accreditation for programs serving infants - age 5 <p><i>NOTE: State must utilize quality accreditation system that meets or exceeds NAEYC standards</i></p>

NOTE ON POLICY OPTIONS:
Italicized Policy Option = Goal Policy Level (Optimal & Recommended)
Bold Policy Option = Benchmark Level (Intermediary Progress Step)

Policy 5: Professional Development and Compensation

Professional development and compensation are vitally important to quality ECE. 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.”¹⁰⁹ A second National Academy of Science report, *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*, looked specifically at ECE for young children and identified the critical influence of young children’s caregivers.¹¹⁰ These important documents, both reviews of the literature that meet the highest scientific publication standards, cull their data from countless studies that have been carried out in a variety of ECE settings. Specifically, research is unequivocal in relating the formal education and specialized training of caregivers to higher quality ECE.¹¹¹ Specialized training is associated with care that is more stimulating and supportive.¹¹² Other studies have shown that caregiver wages are related to higher quality interactions with children.¹¹³

States should pursue the following policy features in an effort to improve the education, specialized training, and compensation of its early care workforce (see Table 5).

5.1 Pre-service Requirements. States should require minimum levels of education prior to employment (pre-service). Formal education levels have been found quite consistently to be associated with high-quality interactions and children’s development in center-based and family day care, and even in nanny care.¹¹⁴ Teachers with higher general educational levels (and specifically with early childhood-related education) are more skilled at helping young children develop and learn.¹¹⁵ Therefore, it is essential that center directors, lead teachers, teachers, assistant teachers, and family child care providers possess minimum levels of pre-service education. A comprehensive set of pre-service requirements would address each of the following in all program types: (1) center directors (MA/MS in ECE, Child Development (CD), EC Administration); (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 has been found to be associated with high-quality care in all types of settings.¹¹⁶ Minimum levels of in-service training should include at least 25 clock hrs/continuing education units (CEU) 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. The recent National Academy of Science report, *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.”¹¹⁷ In order to support professional development, states 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, they need supportive programs that will assist them in meeting this goal.¹¹⁸ A survey of states’ career development initiatives identifies a range of efforts that states have found to be successful in supporting professional development, ranging from scholarships to training registries.¹¹⁹ State funding for professional development should be devoted to a comprehensive mix of mechanisms (scholarships, loan forgiveness programs, release time, direct payments, and course credit) to assist providers

in reaching higher levels of education and skill. A mix of at least three of these supports should be combined in order to offer flexible, appropriate assistance that meets the diverse needs of teachers working on improving and continuing their education.

5.5 Professional Development System. Coordination across the early childhood professional development system should be well-articulated and effective in meeting the needs of teachers, directors, and family child care providers working in early childhood settings. State experience demonstrates that such a system is necessary if efforts to improve the education and training of ECE providers are to be successful.¹²⁰ States mandate, fund, and provide legal or administrative authority to a statewide consortium of key early childhood stakeholders charged with developing and implementing a coordinated, well-articulated, and effective system of early childhood professional development.

5.6 Teacher Compensation. Research has also indicated that teachers' wages are associated with the quality of care provided.¹²¹ 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).¹²² Despite having higher levels of formal education than the average American worker,¹²³ ECE providers earn dreadfully low wages - on average only \$16,980 per year.¹²⁴ In addition, they rarely receive benefits or paid leave.¹²⁵ Not surprisingly, given the low salaries, staff turnover is high in early childhood programs outside the public schools. Some estimate it to be around 36 percent a year.¹²⁶ Turnover is a significant factor associated with poorer quality programs and poorer child outcomes in language and social skills.¹²⁷ In order to attract ECE providers with more education, as well as retain current providers, states must focus on compensation efforts to move toward greater parity between ECE providers and public school teachers. Currently, nine states have some form of compensation program for child care providers.¹²⁸ States should invest in these and similar efforts so that compensation and benefits for all state-funded ECE programs equals compensation and benefits for public school teachers with comparable education and experience.

Table 5: Professional Development and Compensation - Policy Features and Options

KEY POLICY FEATURE	POLICY OPTIONS
<p>5.1 In order to be credentialed, ECE providers are required to meet pre-service education standards, which are defined for each of five levels of responsibility</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State requires the following pre-service education standards for early care and education providers in all programs: (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) • State requires the above standards for at least three of the five levels of responsibility for all ECE programs in the state • State requires the above standards for all five levels of responsibility, but only for some programs • State requires the above standards for at least three of the five levels of responsibility, but only for some programs • State requires the above standards for less than three of the five levels of responsibility, in any program
<p>5.2 In order to be credentialed, ECE providers are required to meet in-service professional development standards tied to their levels of responsibility</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State requires 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 state requires 6 credit hours toward pre-service degree requirement for any early childhood personnel who do not meet the pre-service degree requirement upon hire • State requires the above standards for some (at least 3) of the five levels of responsibility for all the ECE programs in the state • State requires the above standards for all five levels of responsibility, but only for some programs • State requires the above standards for some (at least 3) of the five levels of responsibility, but only for some programs • State requires the above standards for less than 3 of the five levels of responsibility, in any program
<p>5.3 State funds professional development at an adequate level</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State’s annual professional development funding is at least \$800/early childhood personnel working in a state-funded program or licensed child care center/family home • State’s professional development funding is \$500 to \$799/early childhood personnel working in a state-funded program or licensed child care center/family home • State’s professional development funding is \$200 to \$499/early childhood personnel working in a state-funded program or licensed child care center/family home • State’s professional development funding is up to \$200/early childhood personnel working in a state-funded program or licensed child care center/family home

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Table 5 (cont'd): Professional Development and Compensation - Policy Features and Options

KEY POLICY FEATURE	POLICY OPTIONS
<p>5.4 The state utilizes multiple comprehensive mechanisms for helping those working in early childhood settings achieve the educational levels needed for each position and for advancement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>State funds at least three of the following mechanisms: scholarships, loan forgiveness programs, release time, direct payments, course credit</i> • State funds two of the above mechanisms • State funds only one of the above mechanisms • State funds none of the above mechanisms
<p>5.5 The early childhood professional development system is coordinated, well-articulated, and effective in meeting the needs of teachers, directors, and family child care providers working in early childhood settings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>State mandates, funds, and provides legal or administrative authority to a statewide consortium of key early childhood stakeholders charged with developing and implementing a coordinated, well-articulated, and effective system of early childhood professional development</i> • State mandates and funds a statewide consortium, without legal or administrative authority • State mandates a statewide consortium, without legal or administrative authority and without funding • The state has no statewide consortium
<p>5.6 Teachers working in all early childhood programs will be compensated with appropriate salaries and benefits</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>For all state-funded programs, compensation and benefits for ECE personnel are comparable to those of public school teachers, given comparable education and experience</i> • For some (not all) state-funded programs, compensation and benefits for ECE personnel are comparable to those of public school teachers, given comparable education and experience • For all state-funded programs, compensation and benefits for ECE personnel are at least 75% of those of public school teachers, given comparable education and experience • For some (not all) state-funded programs, compensation and benefits for ECE personnel are at least 75% of those of public school teachers, given comparable education and experience • For all state-funded programs, compensation and benefits for ECE personnel are less than 75% of those of public school teachers, given comparable education and experience

NOTE ON POLICY OPTIONS:

Italicized Policy Option = Goal Policy Level (Optimal & Recommended)

Bold Policy Option = Benchmark Level (Intermediary Progress Step)

Policy 6: ECE Systems Development

A wide assortment of early childhood education services and programs have developed at the federal, state, and local levels. This is particularly problematic because different programs are managed by different agencies, leading to mission fragmentation and program overlap,¹²⁹ as well as gaps in policy, funding streams, eligibility, fees, and programming results.¹³⁰ This crisis in coordination results in some families receiving splintered and inconsistent services, while other eligible families fall through the cracks and receive no services whatsoever.¹³¹ The lack of an ECE system also produces operational tensions, with programs routinely competing for providers, space, and sometimes children. In addition, the opportunity to be cost efficient and deliberate in executing service delivery is diminished by the lack of a coordinated system of ECE.¹³²

This policy area focuses on the coordination efforts needed to develop a system of ECE, including governance, continuity, and outreach to parents. In addition, it includes a policy feature focused on promoting collaboration between ECE systems and schools, a critical element of the “ready schools” outcome in the policy logic model. To address this crisis in coordination, the following policy features are recommended (also listed in Table 6).

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.¹³³ A number of state and local governments have created such governance and planning entities¹³⁴ and made notable progress in linking early childhood services with health and other social services, streamlining service delivery, and increasing programmatic efficiency.¹³⁵ 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.¹³⁶ 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)¹³⁷ 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.¹³⁸

6.3 Linkages Between State and Local Governance Entities. In order to coordinate the efforts of the state and local governance entities described, it is recommended that states create, monitor, and financially support linking mechanisms between the state and local governance entities.

6.4 Parent Involvement. The importance of parents to their children's development¹³⁹ and the governance process should not be underestimated.¹⁴⁰ Head Start offers a model of parent involvement in governance, which has been shown to benefit children, parents, and the early childhood program.¹⁴¹ It is recommended that states require governance entities to include a diverse group of parents and consumers in program and policy decisions and in the governance entities described above.

6.5 A Long-term ECE Plan. Due to the lack of coordination between programs and providers described, long-term planning is essential in order for states to integrate various services for children and families.¹⁴² Without such a governing plan, state ECE systems are destined to remain fragmented and displaced in their focus on outcomes. It is recommended that states require and fund the development of such plans. In addition, these plans should be developed with significant public input.

6.6 Coordinating Mechanisms. In addition to state and local governance entities and long-term plans, coordinating mechanisms (e.g., Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR) agencies) are essential for helping parents find and access high-quality ECE programs, for helping providers improve the quality of their care, and for coordinating key programs such as child care subsidies.¹⁴³ Due to the limited supply of ECE and fragmented service delivery systems discussed earlier, parents report feeling that they have few choices for ECE and limited information to distinguish among options.¹⁴⁴ From an economic view, this constitutes a "market failure," since the consumers (parents) have limited information on the range of alternatives and characteristics of high-quality care available to them. Child care markets would work more effectively if parents had access to more information about program quality and help finding a suitable situation.¹⁴⁵ Twenty states have legislation supporting CCR agencies, which serve to coordinate information and data within a community.¹⁴⁶ States should foster the coordination of information on all ECE services through a coordinating mechanism such as a CCR agency.

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. The National Academy of Science panel that authored

Eager to Learn states that it is important for the public to better understand both the potential of the early years and the quality of programming required to realize this potential.¹⁴⁷ As a result, they recommend “systematic and widespread public education to increase public awareness of the importance of providing stimulating educational experiences in the lives of all young children.”¹⁴⁸ 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.¹⁴⁹ It is recommended that states 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.¹⁵⁰ This transition into kindergarten is recognized as a critical passage for young children and their families.¹⁵¹ Efforts to ensure continuity between ECE programs and elementary schools have focused on linking schools with feeder preschools and local Head Start programs, as well as developing tools to help classroom teachers benefit from the knowledge of parents and other educators who already know the children well. In most cases, there are benefits from even a relatively small investment of time or resources spent on developing linkages and transitions.¹⁵² States and school districts support these linkages by integrating training for professionals who work across the ECE and elementary school age span, and facilitating collaboration among preschool and elementary school programs on curriculum, instruction, and assessment.¹⁵³ It is recommended that states require and fund coordinating mechanisms among schools, ECE systems, and health systems. These coordination efforts may include transition efforts, joint professional development, transfer of records, and joint planning.

Table 6: ECE Systems Development - Policy Features and Options

KEY POLICY FEATURE	POLICY OPTIONS
<p>6.1 State mandates state-level governance entity to oversee and coordinate ECE services, for children ages 0-5 years</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State mandates and funds a state-level entity • State mandates the creation of a state-level entity • State does not mandate, but governance entity exists • State does not mandate, no governance entity exists
<p>6.2 State mandates local (sub-state) entities to oversee and coordinate services, for children from birth to age 5</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State mandates and funds local-level entities • State mandates the creation of local-level entities • State does not mandate, but local governance entities exist • State does not mandate, no local governance entities exist
<p>6.3 State creates, monitors, and supports linkages between state and local governance entities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linkages are mandated and funded by state • Linkages are mandated by state • Linkages exist • Linkages do not exist
<p>6.4 Parent involvement in governance and program policy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State governance entity requires and supports the inclusion of diverse groups of parents and consumers in the governance entity • State governance entity recommends the inclusion of diverse groups of parents and consumers • State governance entity does not have provision for parent involvement
<p>6.5 State has set up a process to develop a 10-year integrated plan for ECE</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process is funded and mandated by state, with public input • Process is funded and mandated by state • Process is mandated by state • Process exists • Process does not exist
<p>6.6 State has fostered the coordination of all child care services through a coordinating mechanism, such as Child Care Resource and Referral programs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State funds coordination mechanism in all communities and mandates coordination between state child care subsidy program and the coordinating mechanism • State funds coordination mechanism in some (not all) communities OR does not mandate coordination between state child care subsidy program and the coordinating mechanism • State does not fund or mandate coordination mechanism

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Table 6 (con't): ECE Systems Development - Policy Features and Options

KEY POLICY FEATURE	POLICY OPTIONS
<p>6.7 State has fostered the public's awareness of the importance of the early years and the value of ECE</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>State funds a public awareness campaign and plays a key role in planning and implementing the campaign</i> • State plays a key role in planning and implementing a public awareness campaign, without dedicating state funds • State provides incentives to encourage public awareness campaign • State participates in planning or implementing a campaign spearheaded by another entity • State neither plans nor participates in a campaign
<p>6.8 State has set up mechanisms to coordinate collaboration between community services, including health services, schools, and ECE services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>State requires and funds collaborations among schools, health systems, and ECE systems (e.g., joint professional development, transfer of records, and joint funding)</i> • State requires and funds collaborations between schools and health systems OR schools and ECE systems • State requires, but does not fund, collaborations among schools, health systems, and ECE systems • State requires, but does not fund, collaborations between schools and health systems OR schools and ECE systems • State does not require collaborations between schools and health systems or schools and ECE systems

NOTE ON POLICY OPTIONS:

Italicized Policy Option = Goal Policy Level (Optimal & Recommended)

Bold Policy Option = Benchmark Level (Intermediary Progress Step)

Policy 7: ECE Standards and Assessment

There is currently a significant focus on gauging quality of human services in terms of the results that programs or interventions produce for children.¹⁵⁴ This is coupled with a growing interest in screening and assessing children to determine how best to provide educational services that will promote their growth and development.¹⁵⁵ 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.¹⁵⁶ By defining results clearly, practitioners working with young children can tailor their efforts more precisely to meet the desired results for individual children. Moreover, 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 raise quality.¹⁵⁷ 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.¹⁵⁸

This policy area considers states’ policies on screenings, diagnostic testing, developmental assessments linked to learning standards, and accountability systems. The following recommendations attempt to build on the benefits of standards and assessments while minimizing some of the serious concerns (see Table 7):

7.1 Health Screenings. Assessments aimed at identifying children for health and special services are one of the primary purposes for early childhood assessments, as noted by the Early Childhood Resource Group of the National Education Goals Panel.¹⁵⁹ If early screening services are available to young children and their families, many health-related impairments that impede a child’s readiness for school can be screened and treated earlier.¹⁶⁰ 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. In the National Academy of Sciences report, *Eager to Learn: Educating our Preschoolers*, the panel concluded that 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. The authors recommended that states draft content standards for these early years.¹⁶¹ Despite the educational standards movement, which has prompted all but one state to develop learning standards for elementary school, only fifteen states have specific standards for pre-Kindergarten. Five more states are working on such standards. But, only six states require preschool programs to adhere to the standards.¹⁶² States should develop and monitor the 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)¹⁶³ 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 assessment is to inform the instructional process and support children’s learning.¹⁶⁴ ECE providers can use assessment to gauge what children already know and understand, what could be understood with more practice and experience, and what

is too difficult for some children without further groundwork.¹⁶⁵ Teachers can also use their assessments of children’s learning to reflect on their own teaching practices, so that they can adjust and modify curricula, instructional activities, and classroom routines that are ineffective.¹⁶⁶ 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.¹⁶⁷ Such assessments, however, should not be used to make high-stakes decisions about individual children.¹⁶⁸ Currently, only six states require testing to gauge school readiness statewide.¹⁶⁹ It is recommended that states 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. As discussed, instructional assessments are important tools that teachers can use to promote children’s learning and development and to craft appropriate instructional approaches for all children.¹⁷⁰ It is recommended that all states mandate and provide financial supports for instructional assessments of kindergartners to guide instruction.

Table 7: ECE Standards and Assessment - Policy Features and Options

KEY POLICY FEATURE	POLICY OPTIONS
7.1 State requires health screenings/referrals prior to entry into child care, pre-K, and kindergarten	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State mandates screenings/referrals and provides financial supports • State mandates screenings/referrals, but offers no financial supports • State recommends (or is silent) but provides supports • State provides no supports
7.2 State has pre-K learning standards in the five dimensions of school readiness as defined by the National Education Goals Panel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State has and monitors use of coordinated and appropriate learning standards for children in pre-K that are coordinated with the state K-12 standards • State has coordinated and appropriate learning standards pre-K to grade 12 • State requires appropriate pre-K learning standards • State recommends appropriate pre-K learning standards • State has no learning standards for pre-K • State has inappropriate learning standards for pre-K

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Table 7 (cont'd): ECE Standards and Assessment - Policy Features and Options

KEY POLICY FEATURE	POLICY OPTIONS
<p>7.3 State child care and pre-K regulations require instructional assessment to guide instruction</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State requires the use of instructional assessment in all its programs for children prior to school entry, and provides financial supports • State requires the use of instructional assessment in all its programs for children prior to school entry but does not provide financial supports • There are no state requirements for assessment • State requires assessment, without establishing standards
<p>7.4 State has an appropriate mechanism (aligned with standards) for assessing the condition of children upon entering school</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State requires assessments of at least a sample of children upon school entry, but does not use assessment data to make high-stakes decisions about individual children • Districts mandated to have a plan in place at the local level. Plan may not use assessment information to make high-stakes decisions about individual children. • No mechanism exists or mechanism is harmful to children
<p>7.5 State requires instructional assessment of kindergartners to guide instruction</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State mandates instructional assessment and provides financial supports • State mandates diagnostic assessment, but offers no financial supports • State recommends (or is silent) but provides supports • State provides no supports

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.¹⁷¹ 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. As a result, the quantity of licensed care settings, which often provide higher-quality programs that protect children’s basic health, safety, and development, is particularly limited.¹⁷²

Complicating matters, the existing supply of ECE facilities is unequally distributed, with lower income communities having far fewer licensed settings.¹⁷³ 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.¹⁷⁴ 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.

In order to address the unequal and generally low supply of quality ECE facilities and assist current settings in meeting minimal health and safety licensing requirements, some states have begun to invest in financing (or backing funds for) improvements in care and education settings. The following policy features are critical in this policy area (see Table 8):

8.1 State Support for Capital Investments. Investments in facilities are needed to address the shortages of high quality licensed care across the country.¹⁷⁵ Some states have created financial intermediaries that facilitate financing for child care centers and family child care providers. Some of these agencies provide technical assistance, while others help qualify the borrower for loans, put together a loan package, or even grant loans themselves.¹⁷⁶ It is recommended that states 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.

8.2 Capital Plan. There are dramatic differences in the geographic distribution of ECE services, based mainly on differences in family income, density of population, and family characteristics.¹⁷⁷ In order to address these inequities and 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. It is also recommended that plans to leverage resources from financial institutions, foundations, employers, and other levels of government also should be included in the capital plan.

8.3 Existing Facilities Improvement. Much of the care that families do procure is of low quality in unsafe conditions, often unsafe enough that it could harm a child's health, safety, or development.¹⁷⁸ 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.¹⁷⁹ 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.¹⁸⁰ 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.¹⁸¹ 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,¹⁸² 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.

Table 8: Facilities and Capital Investments - Policy Features and Options

KEY POLICY FEATURE	POLICY OPTIONS
<p>8.1 State takes leadership with other levels of government to support or ensure attention to capital needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The state (1) convenes all levels of government and private entities to leverage funds and coordinate capital planning, (2) contributes funding to create or implement capital plan, and (3) identifies a government or private body responsible for implementing a capital plan</i> • The state takes leadership and convenes all levels of government and private entities for coordination and capital planning, but only takes two of the three leadership roles listed above • State takes leadership and convenes all levels of government and private entities for coordination and capital planning, but only takes one of the three leadership roles listed above • State participates in some way in capital planning, but does not take leadership in this area • State not involved in capital planning in this area
<p>8.2 State capital plan is accessible and methodologically valid</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>State capital plan is (1) based on a recent needs assessment, (2) updated regularly, and (3) a public document</i> • State capital plan only has two of the above characteristics • State capital plan has only one of the above characteristics • State capital plan has none of the above characteristics or state does not have a capital plan

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Table 8 (cont'd): Facilities and Capital Investments - Policy Features and Options

KEY POLICY FEATURE	POLICY OPTIONS
8.3 State invests in improvement of existing child care centers/family child care homes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The state funds a program of grants and loans, either directly or indirectly, to meet a variety of needs for quality physical space, as well as identifies opportunities for leveraging resources from financial institutions, foundations, other levels of government, other state government programs and departments, employers, and community institutions</i> • State does not fund program
8.4 State invests in construction of new child care centers and family child care homes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The state initiates broad financing programs, through bonding authorities or financial institutions, that are backed by state credit to support construction of new child care centers/homes</i> • State does not initiate financing program
8.5 State provides incentives focused on increasing access in underserved communities or for underserved families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The capital plan commits funds based on needs (e.g., low-income communities) and the state provides specific funding for grants or loans focused on underserved communities and families</i> • Capital plan does not commit funds in relationship to need • The state has no capital plan

NOTE ON POLICY OPTIONS:

Italicized Policy Option = Goal Policy Level (Optimal & Recommended)

Bold Policy Option = Benchmark Level (Intermediary Progress Step)

Policy 9: Kindergarten Quality

With the focus on ECE programs for children prior to school entry, the quality of children’s kindergarten experiences often ends up being “overlooked” by policymakers.¹⁸³ Yet, 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.¹⁸⁴ Recent analysis of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study illustrates that across definitions of school quality, the least advantaged of America’s children, who also begin their formal schooling at a substantial cognitive disadvantage, are “systematically mapped into our nation’s worst schools.”¹⁸⁵ 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 learning standards in place all shape the quality of the education provided to five-year-olds across the country. This policy area considers these components of kindergarten quality (see Table 9).

9.1 Full-Day Kindergarten. Given the increasing time demands of work schedules on parents, states can better support working families by providing funding for full-day, full-week kindergarten for all children. In addition, children in full-day kindergarten receive additional instructional time¹⁸⁶ and have been found to make greater academic gains during the kindergarten year.¹⁸⁷ Currently, 26 states finance full-day kindergarten.¹⁸⁸

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. Yet, only eight states require districts to offer full-day kindergarten,¹⁸⁹ which can provide extended learning time to children and at least six hours of child care to assist working parents with their child care needs.

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 at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Such highly qualified teachers 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.¹⁹⁰ All states should adopt a requirement that kindergarten teachers have specific early childhood 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.¹⁹¹ 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.¹⁹²

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.¹⁹³

Table 9: Kindergarten Quality Policy - Policy Features and Options

KEY POLICY FEATURE	POLICY OPTIONS
<p>9.1 State public school financing system provides means to finance kindergarten</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>State financing system provides funding for full-day,¹⁹⁴ 5-day/week kindergarten for all</i> • State financing system provides funding for half-day, 5-day/week kindergarten for some; full-day for some • State financing system provides funding for half-day, 5-day/week programs only
<p>9.2 State requires school districts to provide kindergarten</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Require provision of full-day, 5-day/week kindergarten to serve all children whose parents wish to enroll them</i> • Require provision of full-day, 5-day/week kindergarten in district, do not require districts to meet need • Require provision of half-day, 5-day/week kindergarten to serve all children whose parents wish to enroll them • Require provision of half-day, 5-day/week kindergarten in district, but do not require districts to meet need • Not required
<p>9.3 Kindergarten teacher certification</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Require specific certification in early childhood and ongoing training related to early childhood education</i> • Require specific certification in early childhood and ongoing training (general or not specific to early childhood) • Require specific certification in early childhood • Require courses in early childhood, along with elementary certification • Require elementary certification only
<p>9.4 Kindergarten class size</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Maximum kindergarten class size 16 or smaller</i> • Maximum kindergarten class size between 16 and 25 • Maximum kindergarten class size 25 or larger
<p>9.5 Kindergarten learning standards</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>State has standards specific to kindergarten that consider five domains of early learning and development</i> • State has specific standards for kindergarten year • State has standards that include kindergarten, but not specific to kindergarten year • State has no standards that apply to kindergarten year

NOTE ON POLICY OPTIONS:
Italicized Policy Option = Goal Policy Level (Optimal & Recommended)
Bold Policy Option = Benchmark Level (Intermediary Progress Step)

Conclusion

5 This paper presents a framework designed to enable states to benchmark their policy efforts aimed at promoting school readiness. Such an effort should assist states as they chronicle the status of their services for young children and as they seek to improve such services. Specifically, states will be able to identify and compare strengths, weaknesses, and inconsistencies in their current systems and services aimed at young children and families. Also, this work should help 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 consideration of their collective impact.

This document uses a definition of school readiness that acknowledges readiness as a multi-faceted construct that is highly contingent on the “readiness” of the contexts - family, economic, and community - in which young children grow and develop. With the current growth in maternal employment, preschool attendance, and attention to young children, ECE programs are increasingly important as a common context in which young children develop prior to formal school entry. Yet, our current system of ECE faces crises of: muddled definitions, quality and coordination, as well as tremendous state-to-state variation in programs and policies available to children and families. It is precisely these crises that this project seeks to address.

A theoretical framework is presented with a school readiness policy logic model that maps the school readiness result to four necessary outcomes that support it: (1) ready systems of ECE; (2) ready schools; (3) ready families; and (4) ready communities. For each outcome, two indicators and aligned policy areas are presented. In total, nine policies aimed at the “ready systems of ECE” and “ready schools outcomes” are considered. The policy areas for the other two outcomes are not considered since they are covered in other Policy Matters papers. For each of the nine policy areas, experts in the field identified the most important policy features, policy options, and benchmarks for comparing state policy decisions over time.

Together, these nine policy areas provide an in-depth look at state policies aimed at promoting school readiness. By considering multiple policy features for each policy area, the project is able to describe state policy choices in a multi-dimensional manner that allows for the natural variation between states. And, by defining a set number of specific policy options, with a benchmark, the hope is to provide a useful system for comparing state policy choices.

While the framework advanced in this paper may have face validity, a number of issues and challenges remain. First, the current school readiness framework and the overall Policy Matters framework do not address the relationship between state-level policy and policy implemented at the local level. Many state policy initiatives provide broad definition but leave specific policy development and implementation to local government and communities. While there is support for such a devolution-based approach because of its potential for increased responsiveness, the variety produced as a result of this practice complicates this work, generally, and is intensified around school readiness, where so much policy work occurs at the local level. Second, because school readiness is so contingent upon an array of policies from diverse domains, there may be significant overlap among the policies considered for school readiness and those considered for other Policy Matters outcomes. Conceptually this should be the case, but the overlap may need attention across the Policy Matters documents practically. The reader is encouraged to consult other Policy Matters papers for a discussion of other policies affecting the readiness of children for school. Moreover, the preceding policy recommendations and benchmarks are a beginning comment on policies leading to improved school readiness. While supported where possible with the best available evidence and the consensus of a number of experts and practitioners in the field, further efforts at building a national consensus on these policy directions is warranted.

Appendix A

POLICY MATTERS PROJECT OVERVIEW

State policymakers, whether they are governors, state legislators, executive agency managers or policy advocates, are concerned about the effectiveness of the policies and programs they develop. However, the ability to assess the success of existing and new policy initiatives to produce positive and lasting results for families and children is frequently elusive. Currently, there is no commonly accepted way to assess the degree to which state policies advance or detract from the goal of improving child, family, and community well-being.

While policies are often developed to address or produce a certain set of outcomes, the relationship between policy and outcomes is not well understood. Little investigation of the impact of policy on system improvement and on outcomes for children and families has occurred, leaving policymakers and administrators without the needed information to guide the development and implementation of policy that will produce results.¹⁹⁵

In such an environment, how can state legislators and leaders know whether policies they implement are supportive of families? How can they discern whether the mix of policy improvements and legislative changes bring them closer to achieving better outcomes? How can policymakers and leaders make informed decisions about an array of policy choices for families? To answer these questions, the Center for the Study of Social Policy, with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, has begun a project to develop a results-based framework that proposes benchmarks for state policies.

Policy Matters attempts to offer coherent, comprehensive information regarding the strength and adequacy of state policies affecting children and families. This is done by establishing consensus among policy experts and state leaders regarding the cluster of

policies believed to offer the best opportunity for improving key child and family results. Further, the project puts forth benchmarks for gauging the strength of existing state policies aimed at these results.

How the Policies Are Organized

Policy Matters attempts to examine six related results: school readiness; educational success; youth engaged in positive, productive roles; family economic success; healthy families; and strong family relationships. When viewed collectively, these six results form one possible composite of family-strengthening policy. Included are results that focus on the entire family (family economic success, healthy families, and strong family relationships) as well as results that focus more narrowly on young children (school readiness), youth (educational success and youth engaged in positive, productive roles), and particular issue areas (education, health, and economic success). The mix of results and policies focuses on a broad life span, from birth to retirement (see Figure 1), and a broad range of potential policy categories (see Tables A.1 - A.6).

Each of the six results is guided by a working definition and focus:

- **School Readiness** is defined broadly as the preparedness of young children, ages 0-8 years, to enter school and the preparedness of schools to receive young children into public educational settings. The cluster focuses on young children and the major policies that support their social, cognitive, and emotional development and on child-serving systems and their capacities to deliver high quality, developmentally appropriate care and education. The school readiness policy cluster includes: child care quality, affordability, and accessibility; Head Start, public preschool, and kindergarten quality and standards.
- **Educational Success** focuses on the public school and post-secondary educational achievement of students and the provision of quality public and education services. The educational success policy cluster includes policies governing class size and school enrollment, school accountability systems, teacher quality and retention, alternative education, curriculum standards, testing, and post-secondary financial aid.
- **Youth Engaged in Positive, Productive Behavior** is defined as the availability of healthy personal, civic, peer, family, and community options for young people, ages 8-24. This area focuses on the developmental needs of pre-adolescents, adolescents, and young adults and the crucial transitions between each of these periods of increasing maturity. Policies in this cluster include those that encourage and support youth in meaningful civic roles, prepare young people for work and other adult roles, and make available quality child welfare, juvenile justice, after-school, school-to-work, and health promotion services.

- **Family Economic Success** refers to the ability of working age (18-65) adults and families (up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level) to earn enough pay and benefits to provide for their basic needs and to accrue long-term assets like homes and retirement benefits. This policy cluster includes policies that support the acquisition and retention of quality jobs (e.g., WIA and TANF), improve income and earnings (e.g., state-enhanced minimum wage, personal income tax thresholds, earned income tax credit, health insurance and affordable housing), encourage and protect the development of assets (e.g., Individual Development Accounts, anti-predatory lending), and create an economic safety net for families (e.g., unemployment insurance).
- **Healthy Families** refers to the physical and mental well-being of families and examines the availability, quality, and accessibility of appropriate health care services for low-income families. This policy cluster includes policies related to health insurance coverage and benefits, health safety nets, health support services like transportation and translation, and policies promoting healthy behaviors and environments.
- **Strong Family Relationships** is defined as the relational well-being of families. While the successful promotion of “strong family relationships” is clearly tied to ensuring family economic success and family health, this result focuses primarily on strengthening the formation of families, the interaction of parents and children, the connection of families to social networks, and the adequacy and quality of necessary family resources. This policy cluster includes family formation, child welfare, domestic violence, homelessness, affordable housing, father involvement, and family support (e.g., home visiting, family and medical leave, and parent education) policies.

The categorization of policy according to desired results is imprecise. For the purposes of this project, specific policies were assigned to a category either because the category offered the “best fit” for the policy or because the workgroup tasked with developing benchmarks for that result area was best suited to discuss the policy in question. Many policies appropriately apply to many of the desired results and will “show up” in each place where it is applicable. For example, health insurance coverage plays a role in achieving all six of the results. In addition, some policies appear in multiple categories with a shifted focus depending on the category. For instance, housing policy appears in both the family economic sufficiency and the strong family relationships results. However, housing policy included in the family economic success result focuses on home ownership while reduction in homelessness and affordable rental housing is emphasized in the strong family relationships result. Policies appearing in multiple result areas are likely to be “high leverage” policies because of their potential impact on multiple outcomes.

How the Project Is Organized

Given the breadth and complexity of state policy, it is important to clarify what the Policy Matters project intends to produce. Specifically, *Policy Matters* is an attempt to meet the information needs of policymakers, advocates, administrators, and local leaders with four products. These products, while distinct from one another, are developed sequentially and build upon the successful completion of the previous product.

First, six policy papers will be developed and published during this project. Each paper, one for each of the six result areas, will offer a strategic policy framework for achieving a specific result and set of outcomes. The policy papers will include a short list of policies that collectively have: (1) evidence supporting their effectiveness at producing the desired result, (2) the best chance of being supported by multiple constituencies, and (3) sufficient scale and scope for impacting the desired result. For each recommended policy, the papers also will posit the key attributes and interactions between policies that are thought to enhance the policy's effectiveness. Teams of state and national policy experts will review drafts of the papers and meet to reach consensus on specific policy recommendations. The papers could be a positive contribution to the strategic understanding of the link between policy and results for children and families.

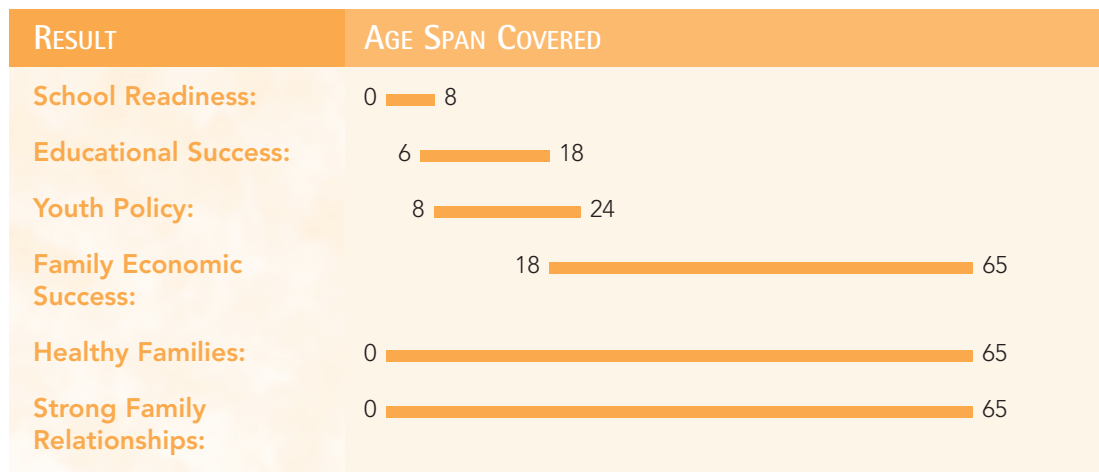
Second, *Policy Matters* attempts to offer coherent, comprehensive information regarding the strength and adequacy of state policies affecting children and families by establishing benchmarks for a cluster of policies aimed at specific child and family results. The recommended policies and their benchmarks will be published for consideration.

Third, the project will develop the policy papers and policy benchmarks into a self-assessment tool useful for those involved in policy planning and advocacy. The self-assessment tool might include a range of policy options beyond the "core" policies recommended in the policy papers and benchmarks product. An easy-to-use tool that identifies strengths and weaknesses in a state's policy agenda that would have import for strategic efforts is envisioned. The tool will be widely available to state and local leaders.

Fourth, this effort could lead to a Kids Count-like product that compares state policy efforts. However, where Kids Count is concerned with child well-being, this effort is concerned with assessing policy. The effort to set benchmarks for state policy might be thought of as a policy well-being project that measures an individual state's policy against agreed upon benchmarks in critical areas. By measuring the strength of state policies against established benchmarks, the project hopes to provide further insight on the policy context of state success at achieving positive outcomes for children and families.

While the collection of products described previously could be useful to the field of policy analysis, this current project is not an attempt to track a wide range of possible policies related to a given topic. Nor is the project intended to be a policy clearinghouse or program “best practices” guide. Lastly, the project is not a well-being indicator, evaluation, or measurement project, though information from these activities helps to shape the policy focus. All of these activities are valuable contributions and services, and many organizations do an excellent job at one or more of them. However, these activities are beyond the scope of the current project.

Figure A.1: Overlapping Age Spans for Policy Matters Results



Scale: Ages 0 – 65 years

Table A.1: Preliminary List of “School Readiness” Policies

CLUSTER	POLICIES
Ready Systems of Early Care and Education (ECE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State-funded ECE Programs • Child Care Subsidy Programs • Child Care Tax Provisions • Licensing and Accreditation • Professional Development and Compensation • ECE Systems Development • ECE Standards and Assessments • Facilities/Capital Investments
Ready Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kindergarten Quality • ECE Systems Development

Table A.2: Preliminary List of “Healthy Families” Policies

CLUSTER	POLICIES
Affordability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health Insurance Coverage • Caps on Out-of-pocket Expenses
Availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provider Incentives
Accessibility and Appropriateness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Streamlined Enrollment Procedures • Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services • Family-supportive Health Care Services • Services in Non-health Settings
Health-related Behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tobacco Tax and Enforcement • Alcohol Tax and Enforcement • School Health Education and Food Services
Health-supporting Environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indoor Air Quality Standards • Lead-based Paint Abatement • Firearm Safety

Table A.3: Preliminary List of “Strong Family Relationship” Policies

CLUSTER	POLICIES
Family Formation and Maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marriage Promotion • Birth Supports • Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancy Prevention
Support for Participation and Nurturance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Father Involvement • Child Support Enforcement • Family and Medical Leave • Respite Care
Lasting Stability and Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child Welfare • Domestic Violence

Table A.4: Preliminary List of “Youth Engaged in Positive, Productive Roles” Policies

CLUSTER	POLICIES
Universal Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education • Preventive Health and Health Education • Health Care Services • Civic Participation
Vulnerable Youth Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child Welfare and Transition to Independence • Juvenile Justice • Career and Work Preparation • Runaway and Homeless Youth Services
Youth-focused Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth Programming • Coordination of Youth Programs • Youth Representation on Boards and Committees

Table A.5: Preliminary List of “Family Economic Success” Policies

CLUSTER	POLICIES
Work Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) • Workforce Investment Act (WIA)
Work Attachment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health Insurance Coverage • Child Care Subsidies • Housing Location
Income Support Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Income Tax Thresholds • Sales Tax • State Earned Income Tax Credits (EITC) • Housing Subsidies • Child Support • State-Enhanced Minimum Wage Policy • Food Security
Asset Development and Protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homeownership • Asset Promotion • Anti-predatory Lending • Unemployment Insurance
Job Creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Sector Employment • Employer-based Wage Subsidies

Table A.6: Preliminary List of “Educational Success” Policies

CLUSTER	POLICIES
Student Achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Achievement Standards • Testing in Core Academic Subjects • School Choice • Graduation Requirements
Quality Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum • Inclusion • Class and School Size • Results Accountability • Community Connections
Teacher Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher Education and Qualifications • Hiring Incentives and Compensation
Education Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elementary and Secondary Funding • Financial Aid for Post-secondary Education
Post-secondary Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic Supports • Diversity • Community College Offering Relevant Courses

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Appendix A includes a more complete description of the Policy Matters project.
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- "On a regular basis" means child care services that are provided and available at a center on more than one day in any one week
 - "Private home" means a non-public residence such as a house, duplex, townhouse, apartment, or mobile home where the caregiver lives and has control over the furnishings and use of space. An individual unit in public housing and university housing complexes is considered a private home.
- Programs exempt from licensing include:
- Summer camps licensed by another state agency, summer schools, or classes for religious instruction conducted by churches during summer months for periods not to exceed four weeks during a 12 month period.
 - Child care facilities established in connection with a religious institution, a business, or recreation center, in which children are provided care for brief periods of time, while parents are on the premises.

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