



Center for National Policy

Early Child Care and Education
The Need for a National Policy

by
Jennifer Kolker, David Osborne and Eric Schnurer



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SUMMARY

Almost two-thirds of American women with preschool children are now in the workforce, and new requirements for work are in place for single parents on welfare. The availability of effective and safe care and education for children has become a pre-occupation of U.S. families, employers, and policy-makers throughout the nation. At the same time, a growing body of research shows that children's development potential is affected strongly by interaction with adults, from the earliest days of infancy, so that the quality of care also is of growing concern.

The purpose of this paper is to summarize the arguments and evidence regarding the importance of early childhood care and education, to review the current state of programs and funding, and to suggest directions for achieving additional progress over the next several years.

This paper cites numerous studies showing that investments in early childhood education produce many improved outcomes for children and society, including increased school performance and attainment, increased economic self-sufficiency, and reduced levels of criminal activity in adulthood. The benefits of such programs are heightened for poor children and parents.

In response to growing evidence of the positive impact and in the face of increased demand, private and non-profit care providers have become more numerous and more professional. Policy-makers at the federal level have enacted programs to provide child care for low-income families, and several states have developed successful innovative approaches to providing early care and education. Regulations have been enacted and implemented, and tax subsidies for child care have increased.

The net result, however, is a spectrum of arrangements that falls short in a number of important ways. Quality and monitoring are still inadequate in general. Salaries and training opportunities for child care professionals are limited, contributing to high job turn-over and instability at facilities. But most importantly, research indicates that far too many children of low-income parents face early care and education options that do little or nothing to help prepare them to succeed in school and life.

K-12 school reforms cannot, in and of themselves, overcome the significant problems confronted by children whose early years do not prepare them appropriately to participate in learning. Without the provision of more widely available, dependable, and affordable alternatives, the country is likely to face an increase in gaps between better-off and poorer children in opportunity for a fair start in life. In the end, these gaps will produce a less equitable – and a less productive and secure – society in the future.

The primary recommendation, therefore, is the development of a comprehensive national policy towards child care and early childhood education.

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A national policy on early childhood education is needed to help ensure that American children of all backgrounds can take full advantage of the opportunities and adequately meet the challenges of the economy and society of the future.

Such a policy would address funding needs for quality child care programs; coordination of educational and social programming for children; development of more effective child care professional training programs; research and dissemination of best practices and program standards; and — most critical — the promotion of equity.

To spark a new national debate on the importance of such an early care and education strategy, Congress and the President could play a key leadership role by enacting legislation that seeks to develop a comprehensive national policy on early care and education. The need for such a coherent look at, and conscious choice about, the future development of our nation's children is compelling.

Aspects of welfare reform legislation, Head Start as a whole, and a variety of other programs directly or indirectly relate to early care and education. In the future, rather than addressing each separately, action on these programs should be considered as part of an on-going process of dealing with broad early care and education goals.

To facilitate a comprehensive approach, Congress should authorize the creation of a national commission to work towards the development of a national policy on early childhood. Congress also could mandate that federal agencies such as the Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Commerce, the Department of Labor, and the Department of Justice begin working together to address early care and education issues in a coordinated manner.

The challenge of moving from the current patchwork of early care and education programs and policies to a more coherent, comprehensive national policy or strategy is formidable. Consideration of the various elements of such a comprehensive policy as pieces of a larger whole, rather than in isolation, is daunting and largely untried. And yet, most research supports the belief that smarter investment of funds and comprehensive policymaking can only increase the likelihood of even better returns on those investments than we are realizing today.

American history is filled with examples of great leaps of progress in education. From the inclusion of the importance of a public education in the Massachusetts Constitution — the oldest continuously functioning written constitution in the world — to the G.I. Bill that enabled millions of returning soldiers to afford a college education, to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that ensured all children equal access to public education, to current efforts to raise standards and performance nationwide, America has achieved greatness through the care and education of its citizens. Perhaps we are reaching the critical mass of opportunity and need necessary to stimulate the next great education achievement. Let the debate begin.

... Congress and the President could play a key leadership role...

I. INTRODUCTION

Americans historically have viewed the commencement of both education and socialization as occurring when a child enters kindergarten or first grade. Nonetheless, discoveries in brain science and child development over the past decade have pointed to the importance that *early* care and education play in children’s development and ability to succeed in school and later in life.¹ At the same time, unprecedented numbers of children are receiving care outside the home as more women enter the workplace. Thus, “early care and education” (ECE) has become an economic, workforce and citizenship issue, not only one of education and care.

The number of women in the workforce who have preschool children has increased from 12 percent just after World War II to 64 percent in 1999 – a more than fivefold increase, with half of mothers with children under one year of age, and about two-thirds of mothers with children age 3-4, working part- or full-time. As a result, while many children still spend their early years in the care of their parents, even more – nearly three-quarters, in fact – spend part of their waking hours in the care of people other than their parents: relatives, caregivers operating out of their homes, workers in child-care centers, Head Start staff members, and teachers in state-financed pre-kindergartens.² As national and state policies move more families out of welfare and into the workforce, even more children are being put in the care of those other than their parents. The quality of the early care and education that young children receive in such settings thus increasingly sets the tenor of their days and lays the building blocks for future academic and social success – or failure.

This dramatic change in our nation’s social and economic fabric over the last generation has been partially met with a parallel response in the availability and quality of early care and education. Recognition of the importance of high quality care and early education has grown over the past two decades – but many families still cannot secure such care at an affordable cost. As a result, the care utilized is uneven at best.

The availability, accessibility and quality of early care and education ranges widely across and within communities, and what children receive varies greatly depending upon family income, race, ethnicity, geographic situation, and other socioeconomic factors. As discussed further below, serious inequities at such a young age are likely to deepen the opportunity and achievement gaps that will show up later in life. In fact, while it is clear that high quality early learning experiences benefit everyone, research shows that the benefits are even greater for low-income children and can help to narrow the differences between poor and non-poor children in academic development. The question remains, however, how much public support should be available for very young children, where parents traditionally have had primary if not sole responsibility?

Existing federal and state investments in K-12 education, child welfare, children’s health insurance, and supports for families to accompany welfare reform are all predicated on the belief that investing in children will lead to their becoming healthier and more productive adults. As have other developed countries, the U.S. has long recognized that public support for education has broad social value, helping assure a strong workforce, a strong economy, low crime, and a society in which we all want to live.

A federal commitment to this principle began with the Northwest Ordinance designed to provide land for schools by Thomas Jefferson and enacted by the First Congress. Thus, there has long been recognition that children’s educational and social development is an important public responsibility of *national* concern. The belief that an effective education system is, in part, a *federal* responsibility, however, has grown over the years, and has received significant new attention in recent years.

The quality of the early care and education that young children receive... sets the tenor of their days and lays the building blocks for future academic and social success – or failure.

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* redefines the federal role in K-12 education with the stated purpose of closing the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers. It is based on four basic principles: stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work.

Arguably, however, the goals of *No Child Left Behind* will be much harder – perhaps even impossible – to reach without recognizing and working to overcome the deficiencies with which many low-income children enter school.

An analysis of the U.S. Department of Education’s Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), a comprehensive data collection effort that provides a national picture of kindergarten students, revealed notable differences in children’s achievement scores in literacy and mathematics by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status at the beginning of kindergarten.³ The research also found that children who attend center-based preschool arrive at kindergarten with higher achievement. Thus, the report’s authors state, “a major way to reduce social inequalities in children’s cognitive status as they begin kindergarten is through disadvantaged children’s participation in well-designed preschool preparation programs with at least some academic content.”⁴

Kindergarten teachers report that many children still come to school unprepared. According to a study by the American Federation of Teachers, more than 50 percent of U.S. children have one or more risk factors for school failure, including inadequate exposure to language and literacy. Children with these risk factors demonstrate lower academic achievement when they are in school. The math and reading scores of new kindergartners from the lowest socioeconomic group are 60 percent and 56 percent lower, respectively, than the scores of kindergartners from the highest socioeconomic group.⁵ Not surprisingly, these gaps can persist and widen throughout the school years and on into the adult years. Noting that poorly-educated workers find it increasingly difficult to earn a living wage in a global marketplace where skills matter more than ever before, the Committee for Economic Development (CED), an independent research and policy organization comprised of business and education leaders, argues, “Society pays in many ways for failing to take full advantage of the learning potential of all its children, from lost economic productivity and tax revenues to higher crime rates to diminished participation in the civic and cultural life of our nation.”⁶

If we accept the premise that public support for education in general creates a public good, because it prepares children to perform better in school, leads to a productive workforce, creates an informed citizenry, increases the likelihood of better public health outcomes, and reduces social problems like crime, addiction, or reliance on publicly-funded social services, then the evidence regarding young children certainly also argues for public attention to early care and education, as well.

Our nation currently has a mix of programs and policies across 50 states and the federal government that are largely disconnected from each other and the K-12 education system. This public expenditure is quite sizable, but in many respects also uncertain. The next section of this paper surveys and summarizes the current state of affairs: what has been learned about the potential benefits of early care and education, the kinds of factors that distinguish “high quality” ECE from child care geared only to keeping children safe while their parents work, and the costs associated with the provision of quality care. The final section presents possible actions that could be undertaken to expand early care and education funding and focuses on particular policy approaches that could improve the availability and delivery of early care and education.

“Society pays in many ways for failing to take full advantage of the learning potential of all its children....”

– Committee for Economic Development

II. WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

“Early Care and Education” refers to a continuum of developmental activities for children that take them from a young age until they enter formalized schooling – either kindergarten or first grade. These are available in varying degrees, oftentimes overlap, and need to be looked at together to assess the overall adequacy of early care and education programs across the U.S.

Parent and Home Care: the traditional approach in which children spend most or all of their time in their own homes, in the care of their own parents. Regardless of other child care arrangements and educational settings, parents continue to provide a large amount of this basic care to their children, and are always fundamental and integral to the early learning process and to later developmental and academic success.

Child care: care provided by a non-parent third party, in a family, home, or institutional setting which may or may not have a formal curriculum, for children ages zero to five. It is usually full day for children of working parents.

Preschool: development-oriented, this is care provided on either a full or half-day basis, in an institutional setting with some curriculum, for children ages three to five.

Prekindergarten: curriculum-focused, pre-K programs are education and care together, provided in an institutional setting either full or half-day, for children age four.

Kindergarten: not always included in ECE discussions, this is the “official” start of formal learning in the U.S. Kindergarten generally covers children age 5-6, but it is not mandatory or even offered in every state and, where offered, is frequently not full day.

The Importance of Early Care and Education

Early care and education have been shown to affect children’s educational prospects in two respects – both in short-term preparation for entrance to formal education and in long-term performance within and beyond the education system.

Improving School Readiness

Most important is widespread agreement regarding the positive impact of early childhood programs on school readiness, if such programs are high-quality programs.

During the mid-1990s, a national survey of 3,600 kindergarten teachers found nearly half of children reported as experiencing “moderate to serious problems” getting started in kindergarten.⁷ There is often a poor fit between the skills of entering kindergarteners and expectations of their teachers. Regular school settings typically feature more children, more adults, more emphasis on formal instruction, and more need for self-control and attention on the part of the pupils.⁸ Teachers in urban, high minority, and high poverty schools reported the most challenges with successful transitions.

The early care and education experience can make a significant difference in this process. A 1999 follow-up to a “*Cost Quality and Outcomes Study*” begun in 1993 determined that children who attended higher quality child care centers performed better on measures of both cognitive skills (e.g., math and language abilities) and social skills (e.g., interactions with peers, lack of problem behaviors) in child care and through the transition into school.⁹ This longitudinal study found that these results continued through kindergarten and in many cases through the end of second grade.

Early care and education have been shown to affect children’s educational prospects ... both in short-term and in long-term performance ...

Children whose mothers had lower levels of education – often putting them at higher risk of not doing well in school – were more affected by the negative aspects of poor quality child care and received greater benefit from high-quality child care. Finally, children who attended child care with higher quality classroom practices had better language and math skills through early elementary school.

A study of Philadelphia kindergarteners found formal care, such as Head Start and other types of center-based care, providing the best preparation for school. Students who received any formal care before kindergarten did better in language arts, mathematics, science, personal knowledge, motor skills and attendance than children who received informal or parent-only care before entering school.¹⁰ Other studies have found that formal child care programs, so long as they are of at least adequate quality, can contribute to children developing better work habits and relationships with peers, and being better adjusted and less antisocial, than children who spend their out-of-school hours alone, in front of the television, or informally supervised by other adults.¹¹

In sum, the research on early childhood care and education tells us that center-based care, particularly when it is of high quality, can help close the school readiness gap between at-risk and other children, increasing the likelihood of better educational and social outcomes.

While some of the results of recent research comparing center-based care and alternatives suggests that there are some behavioral outcomes that are not positive for some children,¹² on balance the evidence supports the value of well-designed care programs in preparation for formal schooling.

Fostering Positive Outcomes over Time

The growing body of research on ECE is consistent in showing that high-quality programs can have positive outcomes for at-risk children in particular. The evidence strongly suggests that quality programs pay off not only in terms of school readiness, but also longer-term for both the child and the family.¹³ Among the results indicated are:

- gains in the emotional and cognitive development of the child, and improved parent-child relationships
- improved educational outcomes for the child
- increased parental participation in the child's education
- increased economic self-sufficiency, initially for the parent and later for the child, through less frequent unemployment, higher income, and lower welfare usage
- reduced levels of criminal activity in adulthood
- improved health-related outcomes for the family as a whole, such as decreased occurrences of child abuse, better maternal reproductive health, and fewer instances of maternal drug abuse.

Attendance at high-quality pre-kindergarten and kindergarten strongly predicts later school success in such areas as:

- improved readiness for learning

Resources on the Evidence

In 1989, The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) began a major long-term Study of Early Child Care (SECC) to examine the relationship between child care experiences and children's development.

Researchers have been collecting extensive data in 10 locations across the U.S. on child care arrangements and other variables for a diverse sample of children and their families.

- higher scores on standardized tests
- reduced likelihood of repeating a grade
- reduced referrals to special education
- a higher probability of completing high school.¹⁴

Long-term evaluations of flagship ECE programs such as the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, the North Carolina Abecedarian Project, and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers have found that children who participated in those programs were less likely to drop out of school, repeat grades, need special education, or get into trouble with the law than similar children who had not taken part, with other benefits seen as well in terms of overall health and well-being.¹⁵

Defining Quality and Identifying What Works

The quality of early care and education is important in determining positive or negative outcomes for children. Aspects of quality generally fall into two categories: children’s daily interactions with their caregivers, and the structural features of their early care environment. Child care is considered high quality when caregivers are sensitive and responsive to children’s social behavior, participate in their play and learning activities, and guide their behavior in a positive manner. Structural features include group size, the number of children in a team or classroom, child-to-staff ratios, caregiver training, and the amount of floor space per child.¹⁶ Additional environmental factors that play a role in defining quality include playground and outdoor surfaces and child/teacher health and safety practices. Also of importance, particularly for infants and toddlers, is low staff turnover – a critical issue facing the early care and education profession and highly linked to caregiver compensation.¹⁷

Multiple studies¹⁸ have found that combinations of the following elements characterize effective early childhood programs:

- small class sizes and low student-to-teacher ratios
- support for teachers to improve teaching practices
- programs that are concentrated and/or long lasting
- ongoing, child-focused communication between home and ECE programs
- curriculum and classroom processes similar to traditional schooling

Attendance in full-day kindergarten is another important component of school readiness. Full-day kindergartners exhibit more independent learning, classroom involvement and productivity in work with peers, than do half-day kindergartners.¹⁹

Standards established by professional associations address both the interactive and structural issues around child care quality. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is the primary accreditation organization for early care and education. The areas used by NAEYC to determine accreditation of early care and education centers include interactions among teachers and children, relationships among teachers and families, staff qualifications and professional development, administration, physical environment, health and safety, and nutrition and food service.²⁰

NICHD/SECC Reports

This on-going study is building a valuable body of evidence on links between child care and children's later life experiences.

Detailed information on study design, findings and analysis from this program of can be accessed at:

www.secc.rti.org

*

CCEERC

See also Child Care and Early Education Research Connections at

www.childcareresearch.org

Finally, since parents play a critical role in children's emotional, physical and cognitive development, parental involvement must be a part of effective early care and education. There are a variety of programs that support involvement:

Resource Programs provide a bridge between families and other support services, such as child care and health care.

Home Visitation Programs can connect families to an array of services, including health care and parenting skills development.

Literacy Programs help families – parents and children – improve their literacy skills.

Comprehensive Programs provide a broad array of child care, early childhood education, parenting and other support services.

Research has identified key elements of successful parent education programs²¹, including ongoing relationships with parents; gearing programs to the “strengths, styles and needs of the individual families”; increasing parental understanding of child development and parent-child relationships; providing parenting models; teaching of new parenting skills; having a network of social support; and, access to community resources. Effective programs have shown improved results on health-related indicators, such as decreased child abuse, better maternal reproductive health, and fewer instances of maternal drug abuse, all with substantial rewards for children.²²

Early care and education can be a cost-effective public investment....

Cost-Effectiveness of Early Care and Education

Early care and education can be a cost-effective public investment, with benefits that exceed the initial investment of public funds. Rigorous studies on the impact of high quality early childhood programs have found significant returns on investment, in addition to significant social dividends including better school success, as well as significantly higher lifetime earnings for both the children and their mothers. These benefits have been estimated to exceed the costs per child by a factor of from 2 to 1²³ to as high as 7 to 1.²⁴

A systematic analysis of the costs and benefits of the Perry Preschool Program, for example, revealed a positive investment return in the following areas:

- savings in schooling, due to primarily to reduced need for special education services, and despite increased college costs for preschool-program participants
- higher taxes paid by preschool-program participants because they had higher earnings
- savings in welfare assistance
- savings to the criminal justice system and to potential victims of crime.²⁵

An analysis by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis estimated the rate of return of the Perry Preschool program at 16 percent (adjusted for inflation), which included more than a 12 percent rate of return for society in general.²⁶ The study compared this to other investments of public dollars, and concluded:

THE NEED FOR A NATIONAL POLICY

*The question we address is whether the current funding of ECDPs (early childhood development programs) is high enough. We make the case that it is not, and that the benefits achieved from ECDPs far exceed their costs. Indeed we find that the return to ECDPs far exceeds the return on most projects that are currently funded as economic development.*²⁷

While the Perry Preschool program is not typical of all child care programs – it has a high cost due to unusually low teacher-to-student ratios, highly certified staff, and longer service terms, among other differences – those cost-benefit findings are consistent with evaluations of other high-quality child care programs. For example, a 1,500-child cohort from the Chicago Child-Parent Center program has been evaluated since 1980. At age 21, this cohort demonstrated economic benefits that exceeded costs, with the greatest return resulting from the Center’s preschool component. The return on the preschool component has been estimated at 7 to 1, with the largest benefit derived from increased earnings for participants expected from attaining higher education levels.²⁸ Other benefits from preschool included savings from lower crime rates and reduced need for school remedial services.²⁹ A cost-benefit analysis of the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention Project found a 4 to 1 cost-benefit ratio.³⁰

As with school-related results, high quality early care and education appear to produce the most pronounced lifetime returns and benefits among low-income children and families. While research shows that high-quality early childhood experiences are beneficial for all children, such positive experiences make *more* of a difference and produce a higher return on investment for children facing one or more of the following risk factors:³¹

- family income below the poverty line
- parents without a high school education
- at least one parent not employed full-time
- children living with a single parent or without any parents
- families on welfare
- families without health insurance coverage

The Scarcity of High-Quality ECE

Despite what is known about the benefits of high-quality early care and education, the *Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers Study* found that “child care at most centers in the United States is poor to mediocre, with almost half of the infants and toddlers in rooms having less than minimal quality. ... [F]ully 40 percent of the rooms serving infants...provided care that was of such poor quality as to jeopardize children’s health, safety or development.”³²

One major factor affecting the availability of high-quality early care and education programs is the lack of qualified staff – an essential element. The National Research Council has recommended that all young children in center-based programs be taught by a teacher with a bachelor’s degree and specialized training in early childhood, yet only 20 states and the District of Columbia require teachers in state-financed pre-kindergarten to meet similar requirements. In 30 states, teachers in child care centers can begin work without having any pre-service training.

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As of January 2002, more than half the states had no requirements for pre-service training for family child care providers, and eleven states allowed directors who had no pre-service training to run child care programs. Some states do not even regulate basic safety procedures such as background checks for staff.³³

One major factor contributing to the lack of trained early childhood education teachers is salary. Child care is not a lucrative career. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Standards found the average salary of a child care worker in 2002 was \$17,310.³⁴ This was over \$4,000 below the average salary of a preschool teacher (\$21,730), which itself was less than half the mean annual salary of an elementary school teacher (\$44,080).

In addition to low salary, there is a decided lack of training to support child-care professionals or program directors. The United States does not have a comprehensive training system for child care professionals. While there are hundreds of teacher training programs nationwide, specialized training for infant care, school age care, family child care and center directors is limited. Three-quarters of the early childhood center directors profiled in one study stated that they were not prepared for the kinds of issues they encountered when they first became directors.³⁵

Low wages and lack of training are accompanied by an extremely high turnover rate in the early care and education field, and this in turn contributes to lower quality and higher costs. Some studies have put the turnover rate at 30% or higher per year, a figure that greatly exceeds other related occupations, such as a 7% turnover rate found among elementary school teachers.³⁶

In 30 states, teachers in child care centers can begin work without any pre-service training.

The Difficulty in Accessing High-Existing Quality ECE

Surveys indicate that parents in low-income families tend to utilize care arrangements that rank significantly lower in objective measures of quality and in desirability to parents. Even where quality care is available, low-income families are less likely to obtain such care than are higher-income families, due to cost and other factors. Low-income families are most likely to use care by relatives³⁷ – the type of care that is less likely to focus on educational and developmental factors that contribute to school readiness³⁸ – and are least likely to use center-based care, the type of care that is more likely to prepare the children for school.

Cost is certainly a primary factor. Low-income families are four times more likely than higher-income families to mention cost or affordability as a key factor in their selection of child care. The ECLS-K data suggest that less than half of the nation's least-advantaged kindergartners (those from the lowest 20% of the population in terms of socioeconomic status) had been enrolled in either center-based preschool (20%) or a Head Start program (20%). In addition, part-day, part-year program models, such as Head Start, do not meet the needs of parents working full-time.³⁹

Recent data also suggest that race and ethnic background play a role in differentiating families' child care choices.⁴⁰ For example, Latino families tend to use child care centers less, and relatives more, than white or African-American families, while African-Americans use full-time care more than whites or Latinos.⁴¹ Cultural and linguistic differences also have a significant impact on the level of parental involvement in early childhood education programs and services. Recent immigrants also tend to be less involved in the formal educational system because of work, language, and cultural barriers.⁴² And, although youngsters whose mothers had only a high school education are more negatively affected by poor care – and more likely to benefit from high-quality care – such youngsters also tended to be in lower-quality classrooms.⁴³

EXAMPLES OF HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Both the Head Start program and the Military Child Care system offer valuable lessons in designing a system of early care and education that meets the needs of children, families, and American society. Both have evolved over three decades and offer a number of lessons on the quality and necessary infrastructure of early care and education.

Over 20 million children have participated in Head Start since its inception in 1965. Head Start incorporates early childhood development, health and family services. Early Head Start, begun in 1995, expanded the system for children age 0-3. Head Start has long emphasized the necessity of addressing children's health as a precursor to learning and provides necessary family support to many American families. The educational component of Head Start focuses on language, numeracy, curiosity and motivation to learn. While there is debate over whether the focus of Head Start should be on literacy and education versus social services, it provides important lessons for early care and education generally:

- *Resources are tied to a set of performance standards,*
- *There is a well-stated and enforced monitoring and enforcement system,*
- *A commitment is made to professional development (including adequate compensation), and*
- *The Head Start system provides an infrastructure of resources and support that does not exist for many non-Head Start providers.*

The second national system of early care and education is military child care, the largest system of employer-sponsored child care in the country. The military child care system has received high marks for providing quality, accessible care for children of military employees. The Department of Defense (DoD) provides child care through its Child Development Program (CDP), which serves about 176,000 children ages 6 weeks to 12 years old in 900 child development centers (CDCs) and in 9,200 family child care (FCC) homes nationwide. Over 48% of all care provided is for infants and toddlers. The system offers full-day, part-day, and hourly (drop-in) child care; part-day preschool programs; before and after school programs for school-age children; and extended-hour care including nights and weekends.

Despite its large size, the CDP is also a high-quality system. The Military Child Care Act of 1989 was designed to promote quality in CDCs, and it has helped to do so through no-notice inspections, salaries tied to training milestones, and the provision of training and curriculum specialists. The NAEYC accreditation rate in military centers is 96 percent, compared to 8 percent nationwide in civilian centers. The DoD has also applied some of the same regulations designed to improve quality in centers to FCC homes – something rarely accomplished on the civilian side.

Key components of the military system – compared to the civilian system – that promote high quality include a minimum salary level that is higher than the civilian caregiver average, complete comprehensive child development training for staff, and centralized oversight of the program.

In October 1999, the General Accounting Office published a study comparing the costs of civilian child care and of child care in the Air Force system. When adjusted for age distribution of children, the per-hour cost for Air Force child care was approximately 7 percent higher than in civilian centers, largely due to pay differences.

****See U.S. General Accounting Office, *Child Care: How Do Military and Civilian Center Costs Compare?* GAO/HEHS-00-7, October 1999.****

Low-income children also are more likely to have mental, physical, or learning disabilities⁴⁴, yet there is a shortage of child care that meets the special needs of children with disabilities.⁴⁵ For example, the U.S. General Accounting Office found that six out of seven states surveyed indicated a shortage of child care for children with disabilities or other special needs.⁴⁶ This shortage exists despite research which indicates that providing supports like quality child care to children with disabilities and other special needs early in life may reduce their need for special education and other supports later in life.⁴⁷

How ECE is Currently Financed

Unlike funding for much of America's education system, the bulk of the money spent annually on child care programs is primarily borne by parents. In 2001, for example, one study estimated that 60 percent of the funds spent on licensed child care programs was paid by parents, while government paid for 39 percent and businesses paid the remaining one percent.⁴⁸ Another study estimated that parents pay about 50-55 percent of child care costs, the federal government pays 25-30 percent, state and local governments pay 15-20 percent, with corporate and philanthropic investments at an approximate 1-5 percent.⁴⁹

Care for a 4-year old in a child care center averaged \$4,000-\$6,000 per year in 2000.⁵⁰ The costs of child care at an urban center exceeded the cost of tuition at a public college in 48 states.⁵¹ In some cities, child care costs twice as much as college tuition.⁵² Some centers charged upwards of \$10,000 per year, and care for infants and toddlers cost significantly more than that for 4-year olds. Since these are per-child costs, overall costs to a family to provide early care can be double or triple that amount.

Even if a two-parent family with both parents working full time at minimum wage (\$21,400 a year before taxes) managed to budget 10 percent of their income for child care (\$2,140 per year), they would be left several thousand dollars short of what they need to afford average-priced child care for one child, much less the high prices charged by many better quality centers and family child care homes.⁵³ Nationwide, low-earning families that have child care expenses pay an average of 16 percent of their earnings for child care, compared with only 6 percent for higher-earning families.⁵⁴

While children's early care historically has been a fundamental responsibility of the family, there is also a history of federal financial commitment to early care and education. As noted above, the federal government, in fact, is already the largest source of public funding for child care and early childhood education programs.

Most of this federal assistance – other than tax expenditures – is targeted to low-income families or children with disabilities. Head Start, the most well known and the largest such program funded by the federal government, serves low-income children and children with disabilities from 3 to 5, and their families.⁵⁵ In addition to the Head Start program, several other federal programs – the Child Care Development Block Grant, Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), and the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) — are used by states to provide subsidies to low-income families for child care assistance.

The 1996 welfare reform legislation boosted funding for the child care block grant by around \$4.5 billion over 6 years. In addition, states were given authority to spend an unlimited amount of money for child care from their annual share of the \$16.5 billion TANF block grant. Largely as a result of these provisions, total federal spending on child care, Head Start, and other child development programs has increased from \$9 billion in 1993 to over \$20 billion in 2001.

In 2000... the costs of child care at an urban center exceeded the cost of tuition at a public college in 48 states.

Despite significant increases in federal funding for programs such as Head Start, child care subsidies and state-funded preschool fall short of serving all eligible children. A widely-cited U.S. Department of Health and Human Services study showed, for example, that only 12 percent of children potentially eligible under federal guidelines are receiving subsidies through the child care block grant.⁵⁶

The guidelines permit families with incomes of up to 85 percent of a state's median (median family income in the United States was \$51,000 in 2000) to receive state child care subsidies. However, it was not Congress' intent to make all of these families eligible and nearly all states have established somewhat lower income eligibility limits. As states have faced increasing budget deficits, their commitment to child-care funding has decreased. Changes in state regulations have made fewer families eligible for a child care subsidy and there is a waiting list for subsidies in many states. More than 550,000 children are on subsidy waiting lists, including 280,000 children in California alone, nearly 50,000 children in Florida, and approximately 34,000 children in Texas.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, most federal funding of early care actually is provided through the tax system, most notably the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC), available to all families with employment-related child care expenditures. Prior to 2001, the child tax credit provided few benefits to lower-income families because it was not refundable. But the 2001 tax bill not only expanded the credit from \$500 to \$1,000 per child but also made it partially refundable for families with modest amounts of earned income and little or no income tax liability. Nevertheless, of the more than \$19 billion claimed in child tax credits in 2000, families with adjusted gross income of \$30,000 or less claimed \$4.2 billion; families at this income level claimed another \$1.5 billion of the \$2.7 billion in dependent care credits. Thus, nearly three-quarters of federal tax credits for early childhood – which exceed federal direct spending for ECE – accrue to families with incomes above \$30,000. The CDCTC's major effect is to skew federal support for child care heavily toward middleclass households.

Changes in state regulations have made fewer families eligible for a child care subsidy....

How Much Would Widespread Access to High-Quality ECE Cost?

Estimates of the total amount spent annually on early care and education vary. One 2001 estimate of total spending reached \$50-55 billion.⁵⁸ Another estimate pegged the number at a lower level, approximately \$38 billion in 2001.⁵⁹

Despite the uncertainty of that range, it is clear that any effort to extend high quality early care and education benefits to all children aged 0 to 6 would require enormous funding above and beyond the tens of billions of dollars currently spent by families, government, and private organizations and companies.

Some efforts to put a price tag on possible universal pre-kindergarten efforts have been made, suggesting the significant scale of such an undertaking.

- While campaigning for the presidency in 2000, Vice-President Al Gore unveiled a \$50 billion program to extend pre-kindergarten to the country's 8.3 million three- to five-year-olds not yet enrolled in kindergarten.⁶⁰
- The Committee for Economic Development has estimated that a universal pre-K program would cost at least \$25-35 billion and as much as \$41.5 billion, on top of the \$20-25 billion already being spent by the federal government annually.

- A Brookings Institution analysis estimated that a high-quality, two-year program of universal prekindergarten could cost about \$8,000 per child annually, or an estimated \$30 billion per year, and that was if the program were limited to families with incomes of less than \$30,000.⁶¹
- More recently, analysts have estimated that a public program offering universal full-day prekindergarten for four-year-olds could cost between \$15.4 and \$20.8 billion.⁶²

Such a massive investment to achieve universal pre-kindergarten or to meet the child care needs of all children aged 0-6 and their working parents seems unlikely at present. There are nevertheless any number of incremental policy decisions that could be made to improve the availability and affordability of quality early care and education. Some of these possibilities will be addressed in the next section.

III. Next Steps: National Policy Toward Early Care and Education

Early care and education should be an important focus of national policy: Whether children succeed at school, and eventually at work and as contributing members of society, is greatly influenced by whether they are provided adequate high-quality early childhood care and education. Adequate ECE therefore also can have a dramatic effect on future public social spending, the future productivity of the nation's workforce, and a broad range of social costs such as income dependency, crime, and health care. Yet, despite all this, the country lacks a comprehensive policy for ECE.

Not too long ago, our nation undertook to formulate the beginnings of a national education policy. In 1989, President George H.W. Bush and the 50 governors met in an education summit in Charlottesville, Virginia, to set education goals for the nation. In February 1990, the President announced eight National Education Goals, which were intended to improve learning and teaching throughout the nation's education system, provide a national framework for education reform, and promote systemic changes to ensure equitable educational opportunities and high levels of educational achievement for all students.⁶³ Goal One focused on school readiness: "By the year 2000, all children will start school ready to learn."⁶⁴ One of the school readiness objectives asserted, "All children will have access to high-quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs that help prepare children for school."

There has been some progress towards those goals and objectives, but not nearly enough. In part, this failure is due to the high costs of bringing such a policy to fruition, as noted earlier. In part, too, this failure is due to the problem of defining what the elements of such a policy might include: Is the goal of a national ECE policy to help children? Is it an economic development goal? Is it a social welfare goal to meet the needs of low-income children and their parents? Is it an effort to create better paying jobs in the child care field? Is it an effort to reduce future crime rates? Each of these concerns is addressed by federal, state, local governments, non-profits, and the private sector through various laws, policies, regulations, and programs; rarely are they addressed together or as part of a larger strategy.

Needed: A National Debate

To spark a needed national debate on the importance of such an early care and education strategy, Congress and the President could play a key leadership role by enacting legislation that seeks to develop a comprehensive national policy on early care and education.

Early care and education should be an important focus of national policy.

Congress should authorize the creation of a national commission to work towards the development of such a national policy on early childhood. Congress also could mandate that federal agencies such as the Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Commerce, the Department of Labor, and the Department of Justice begin working together to address early care and education issues in a coordinated manner.

Such an attempt to formulate a national policy on early care and education would help identify and track benefits to society that could be tapped to help fund these efforts over time. Examining the costs of early care and education by themselves almost ensures that the effort will be under-funded. However, the benefits of such investments could be expected to yield savings in a variety of other areas of government spending over time, including remedial education, truancy, teen pregnancy, health care, juvenile justice, criminal justice, job turnover, unemployment, and income support. While such savings in government programs over time may not directly support the upfront investments in children and families, they may come to offset some of those initial costs if policy-makers know what to look for.

As noted earlier, investments in early care and education may well produce a significant return on public dollars. As the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis concluded in its study of early childhood development:

The return on investment from early development is extraordinary, resulting in better working public schools, more educated workers, and less crime.

This is why a number of business-related organizations have endorsed increasing investments in early care and education. For example, the Business Roundtable, an association of 150 chief executive officers of leading corporations, and Corporate Voices for Working Families, a coalition of three dozen corporations, issued a call to action on early childhood education in 2003. Declaring that “America’s continuing efforts to improve education and develop a world-class workforce will be hampered without a federal and state commitment to early childhood education,” the Business Roundtable and Corporate Voices for Working Families developed six guiding principles that defined the components of a successful early childhood education system and high-quality programs.⁶⁵ The two business organizations also observed, “Not only does high-quality early childhood education make a difference for children, it matters to their employed parents. Employers increasingly find that the availability of good early childhood programs is critical to the recruitment and retention of parent employees.”⁶⁶

“Clearly, the development of a national ECE policy does not require starting from scratch. The child care sector already is large, and the demand for quality child care is likely to continue to grow. As noted in the Box on page 16, there are now more licensed child care facilities in the U. S. than public elementary and secondary schools, with more than 934,000 employees. More parents seek affordable, high-quality child care programs, and a broad array of others also support the development of such programs, including employers, educators, and government officials. In short, we may have reached a critical mass necessary to support the development of a national ECE policy, but numerous barriers, particularly related to funding, must be resolved before such a policy has a realistic chance of adoption.”

Other Opportunities for Action

Short of the development of a comprehensive national early care and education policy, there are numerous specific areas in which the federal government, state and

***Congress should
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commission....***

Overall Demand for Quality ECE

A National Child Care Association study identified factors that contribute to the likelihood that demand for quality child care will continue to grow.⁶⁷

- With just less than four million births a year, America's pool of potential future children needing child care is not abating.
- The high cost of living in many areas is requiring more two full-time wage earners in families.
- Understanding of the benefits of more costly high-quality care is growing.
- About half of children born today are the first or only child in their family. Also, delays in child-bearing allow more dual income couples with higher earning power to spend more money on child care options.

There are more licensed child care facilities than public elementary and secondary schools. The 2004 Children's Foundation Child Care Licensing Survey of child care centers identified nearly 117,300 licensed child care centers⁶⁸, compared to more than 91,000 public elementary and secondary schools in the United States.⁶⁹ The number of licensed centers accounted for by this annual survey has increased 26% since 1991.⁷⁰ In addition, more than 300,000 regulated family child care homes operated in 2003, up from 193,000 child care homes in 1988.⁷¹ Beyond that, there are an estimated four unregulated family day care homes for every regulated one.⁷²

Thus, the child care industry is a high-growth industry. One federal study has estimated that child care work will be among the fastest growing occupations for the decade 1998-2008, with estimated growth of 26 percent.⁷³ An investment in a more professionalized child care sector, with enhanced employment and quality service standards, should generate tax revenues to offset some of that investment.

The billions spent on licensed child care programs in 2001 helped employ some 934,000 employees – slightly more than are employed in America's public secondary schools and twice as many employees as are employed directly in agriculture.⁷⁴ In the National Child Care Association, researchers estimated that the licensed child care sector enabled parents to earn more than \$100 billion annually by making it possible for them to work.⁷⁵ These wages, in turn, engendered almost \$580 billion in total direct, indirect, and induced labor income, supported approximately 15.2 million jobs, and created more than \$69 billion in tax revenues.⁷⁶

local governments, non-profits, and the private sector can work to improve the current system. What follows are short discussions of some of these areas – funding; coordination of services; training; research; standards setting; facilities development – and some recommendations for efforts that could be undertaken to make the early care and education system work better.

Caring Enough About ECE To Fund It.

Ensuring high-quality early care and education will require a societal and economic commitment to funding structures similar to the nation's long-standing commitment to the K-12 education system.

THE NEED FOR A NATIONAL POLICY

The existing education system's funding is currently expected to support early learning as well, and the funding mechanisms for supporting child care are patchy, in many cases insufficient, and unavailable to many working families.

Some states are using a variety of innovative approaches and multiple revenue sources to finance early care efforts.

- Arkansas enacted a surcharge on beer earmarked for child care.
- California voters in 1998 approved Proposition 10 imposing a 50-cent tax on cigarettes and other tobacco products, the funds from which go to support and improve early childhood programs.
- Colorado established a child care contributions tax credit and a voluntary income tax check-off to raise money to improve child care programs.
- Connecticut makes tax-exempt bonds available to finance facilities for early childhood programs, and uses TANF funds to underwrite a portion of the debt.
- Georgia offers a universal pre-kindergarten program for all 4-year-olds in the state, funded by state lottery proceeds, Child Care Development Block Grant funds and Head Start.
- Maine, Kansas and Kentucky have allocated some of their states' tobacco settlement funds to early care and education initiatives.
- In New York City, Local 1199 of the National Health and Human Services Employees Union raises \$9 million each year for child care subsidies through collective bargaining agreements with employers.
- Seattle, Minneapolis, Greater Kansas City, the Lakes Region of New Hampshire and Fairfax County, Virginia, participate in the Finance CIR-CLE, a national initiative that is testing the applicability of the higher education funding model to child care financing.

Despite these promising efforts, recent severe fiscal problems have forced states to cut much of their discretionary spending – largely programs and policies that are not federally mandated. As a result, funding for early childhood education programs has been adversely affected. In 2003, for example, at least 10 states and the District of Columbia reduced spending on child care assistance programs, including California, which cut \$265 million from its child care programs; Minnesota, which cut state funding for child care assistance by \$86 million; and even Georgia – a consistent leader in early childhood education – which cut state funds for child care-related programs by some \$10 million.⁷⁷ Other states were unable to come up with state dollars to match and draw down federal child care funds, or were unable to transfer TANF funds to federal child care block grant programs due to increased TANF caseloads.⁷⁸

Stable and ongoing sources of funding are needed to ensure that fluctuations in state budgets do not further undermine advances made in ECE, as has happened in recent years. The federal government could provide such “underwriting” for ECE if there is the political will to identify “new” dollars for this purpose. There is a range of possibilities – none of which could be instituted without contention – that includes but certainly is not limited to:

...the funding mechanisms for supporting child care are patchy, in many cases insufficient, and unavailable to many working families.

- *Creating a new ECE-dedicated tax.* This is unlikely but perhaps possible given the current vogue for “sin” taxes — for example, additional taxes on tobacco products, a federal alcohol-by-the-drink tax, or a surcharge on criminal court cases, which many states currently use to fund victims’ compensation.
- *Diverting dollars from other initiatives more creatively than simply choosing less-favored areas to de-fund.* For example, if states can demonstrate success in reducing juvenile delinquency through the provision of more quality child care and after school care, some federal juvenile justice funding can be diverted into ECE. Similar possibilities exist with workforce development and job training programs. There would be significant opposition to such diversions, however — especially as a reward for success — from advocates of these programs, which also are under-funded.
- *Cutting other areas of current spending and dedicating those funds to ECE programs.* However, while there are numerous lists of so-called wasteful federal spending, there is little consensus on them and for every area of spending, there will be an advocacy group with which to contend.
- *Directing funds to specific ECE concerns where some spending will be offset.* For example, increasing early childhood education teacher salaries can improve the quality of services delivered to children, while lowering some operating costs by reducing high turnover rates.
- *Making the Dependent Care Tax Credit refundable* in order to provide greater financial benefits to low-income families by lowering the income levels at which the credit phases out or by decreasing the benefit levels for high-income families.
- *Fostering public-private partnerships to increase child care funding by non-governmental sources.* As noted earlier, only one percent of all child care funding at licensed facilities nationwide currently comes from businesses or philanthropic sources.⁷⁹

... the federal government could reorganize existing federal resources....

Coordinating Educational and Social Services for Young Children, and Services to Help Their Parents in the Workforce.

Whether or not there is any consensus on where *new* money would come from, the federal government could reorganize *existing* federal resources to maximize their effectiveness. As a start, the federal government can support state efforts to strengthen a system of early care and education by giving states the ability to move dollars across funding categories, and reprogram federal dollars.

Many argue that incorporating ECE into the existing K-12 system would enable more coherent programmatic and funding for children from their early years through school. Some states have already begun this through the initiation of Pre-K for 4-year-olds. These include:

- *Investment in state-funded pre-kindergarten programs, including adding on to Head Start.* Most states focus their pre-kindergarten efforts on the neediest youngsters. Twenty-six target children from low-income families; 15 of those also look at other risk factors, such as having a teenage parent. And nine states leave it up to local districts to determine which risk factors they will consider. Only Georgia, New York, and Oklahoma and the

District of Columbia are phasing in pre-kindergarten for any 4-year-old whose parent wants it, regardless of income.

- *Establishment of mandatory, full-day kindergarten.* Every state subsidizes kindergarten in at least some districts or for a portion of the school day. Twenty-five states and the District of Columbia pay for kindergarten for the full school day, at least in districts that opt to offer such services. But nine states – Alaska, Colorado, Idaho, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, and Pennsylvania – still do not require districts to offer kindergarten.

Other states have begun to move their child care subsidy programs out of their child welfare departments and into their education departments. Nonetheless, for younger children, ECE is as much a social service as an educational one. Children need social and health as well as educational support and focus from their earliest years to prepare them well for the traditional K-12 learning process. This dictates a need for bridges between the educational, social service, and workforce development systems regardless of where ECE 'lives.'

The current configuration pits education and child care groups against each other, compromises school districts' support for Pre-K since they have to fund it themselves, and makes child care providers worry about advances in ECE for fear of losing a revenue stream. Integrating funding sources for particular services would help maximize services, dollars, and coordination and collaboration between all sectors serving children and their parents.

To the maximum extent feasible, all early care and education programs and funding should be brought together under one agency or initiative. Separate systems for financing and delivery of child care, pre-K, and K-12 education hamper the effectiveness and efficiency of each system individually as well as the overall education and socialization of the nation's youth. Efforts should be made to harmonize the eligibility requirements, program standards, and outcome measurements of various subsidized child care programs, so that service providers do not have to maintain multiple accounting systems for various funding categories serving the same children.

Governments also should look for opportunities to coordinate services such as employment development, job training, and financial aid for students with children, with other efforts to ensure that quality early childhood care and education programs attain the dual goals of assisting working parents in meeting their child care needs and preparing children to enter the workplace in the future. Head Start and many pre-kindergarten programs tend to be half-day, part-year programs. While these programs emphasize education and child development, they may not be convenient for most parents working full-time. Meanwhile, other programs that provide all-day care for children may support the efforts of working parents but not emphasize education and child development. Integrating child care with other programs should help improve the effectiveness of both.

Pursuing Actions That Support the Provision Of Quality ECE Short Of Comprehensive Funding

Developing an effective national approach to early care and education does not require starting from scratch. Rather, the lessons of successful high-quality systems of care can be brought to more children through a number of different approaches.⁸⁰

*The current
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- **Training**

The lack of sufficient training for ECE teachers and directors is a major barrier to achieving quality. Studies have found teacher education to be related to the quality of preschool education and the development of children in preschool classrooms.⁸¹ Both general education and specific preparation in early childhood education have been found to predict teaching quality.⁸² Despite this link, fewer than half of all early education teachers hold a four-year degree, and many have no college education.⁸³

In most states, a high school diploma is all a person needs to teach in a licensed child care center.⁸⁴ The Children's Defense Fund has observed that cosmetologists in some states must attend between 1,500 to 2,000 hours of training before they can get a license, and yet 30 states do not require teachers in child care centers to have any early childhood training before they begin working with children.⁸⁵

Many states have invested in teacher training as an aspect of credentialing programs and increasing their teacher quality. Similar efforts to ensure that child care programs are staffed by appropriately trained and credentialed professionals could yield better performing child care facilities.

The federal government could fund training initiatives for states, as well as develop and support existing training curriculums. For example, the government could support institutions of higher education in developing programs to enhance the professional development of early childhood teachers. These programs could focus on teacher preparation, with emphasis on child and brain development; best teaching practices; and skills development for effectively teaching diverse student populations.

The federal government also could help states ensure acceptable quality levels through the promotion of national standards for early care and education. For example, Congress ordered that by 2003, 50 percent of a Head Start program's teachers must have an associate's degree in early-childhood education. While this is a positive step to ensure that the most qualified instructors are teaching children, it is also an unfunded mandate. The federal government could play a role both in supporting teacher training, recruitment and retention, and credentialing – and in funding such programs.

In an effort to ensure the quality of early childhood education, both the federal and state governments could condition portions of their funding on certain requirements, including but not limited to licensed facilities, staff-to-child ratios, staff credentials, availability of hours of services to meet the needs of evening, night, and weekend workers, and the like. The goal of such strategies would be to move subsidized child care towards higher levels of quality.

At least 34 states are already moving in this direction. They typically provide higher payments to service providers achieving one or more levels of quality beyond mere licensing by the state. More successful tiering structures have at least three levels: a basic licensing level; a middle level with standards that fall between licensing basics and the aspirational; and accreditation by a nationally-recognized organization.

- **Dissemination Of Research And Best Practices**

There are many examples of successful early child care and education programs and many lessons learned in developing and operating them that could be shared with the field. Leadership in this area – particularly in sharing best practices and specific successes – could make a real contribution.

There are many examples of successful early child care and education programs and many lessons learned in developing and operating them that could be shared with the field.

Currently, however, a lot of research and best practice information does not get into the hands of those at the state level or those directing local programs.

The federal government can support the dissemination of research, and funding of additional research, to improve the overall knowledge base relating to ECE and what works and does not work.

The federal government also can help to fund state level “Centers” on ECE to assist local areas and programs in development of ECE programs, training, parent involvement, and other aspects of high quality ECE program development.

Both federal and state governments should support critically-needed research and data collection regarding the effective delivery of quality child care, cost-benefit analyses, and the services and policies that most directly improve the learning capabilities of children.

Businesses and foundations also should engage the research community in linking the provision of quality child care to the needs of future students and employees.

- **Standard-Setting And Higher Standards**

The federal government also has a role to play in working with states to support (in some cases, to develop), disseminate and enforce standards for early care and education. National quality standards can – and should – be more readily attainable by programs nationally.

Currently, most states regulate only the basic physical environment of early care settings, and requirements for teacher/child ratios are less stringent than national quality standards. The federal government, working closely with states, can assist in developing and funding quality initiatives, center and director credentialing, facility improvement, and teacher training and recruitment.

More than 25 states have standards describing desired results, outcomes, or learning expectations for children below kindergarten age. These could be disseminated to and promoted in other states. Head Start has developed a Child Outcomes Framework, and national organizations have developed content standards in areas such as early literacy and mathematics.

The federal government could enable the broad adoption of these protocols and others like them. As noted above, some facilitation of standard-setting can be accomplished by tying funding and reimbursements to the attainment of higher standards.

- **Ensuring that Access to ECE Serves as a Uniter, Not a Divider**

In general, this paper has argued for access to high-quality ECE for *all* American children and their families. This is and should not become not only a poor-people’s program. But if the federal government is to play a narrow role in this area and leave it largely to the states, as with education generally, then it can potentially play the same role it has increasingly played in the education funding context, filling the gaps that states have difficulty filling on their own.

...facilitation of standard-setting can be accomplished by tying funding and reimbursements to the attainment of higher standards.

Increasingly, the federal government has assumed the role of reducing inequity in education funding. Starting in the Clinton Administration, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act now funds the nation's poorest school districts more generously than more affluent districts. (Historically, only about 10% of the money had been targeted directly, through "concentration grants," to high-poverty counties.)

Since access or lack of access to ECE has its biggest effect on poor children, the biggest opportunities for the federal government to reap the greatest rewards from its investment of public funds is in this area. It can play a particular but critical role in making sure that access to ECE for the neediest children is something our nation provides to narrow the gap at birth, so all children start life on a level playing field.

IV. Conclusion

Mounting evidence points to the myriad benefits of early child care and education. Those benefits accrue to children, particularly children in low-income families, in improved school readiness and emotional and cognitive development. The benefits also assist parents in the rearing of their children and in enabling them to become productive members of the workforce. Society also benefits from the early care and education of children through the increased likelihood that the children grow up to become educated citizens and skilled workers, with all the social and economic advantages that those and other positive outcomes yield.

The challenge of moving from the current patchwork of early care and education programs and policies to a more coherent, comprehensive national policy or strategy on early care and education is formidable. The consideration of the various elements of such a comprehensive policy as pieces of a larger whole, rather than in isolation, is daunting and largely untried. And yet, most research supports the belief that smarter investment of funds and comprehensive policymaking can only increase the likelihood of even better returns on those investments than we are realizing today.

American history is filled with examples of great leaps of progress in education. From the inclusion of the importance of a public education in the Massachusetts Constitution – the oldest continuously functioning written constitution in the world – to the G.I. Bill that enabled millions of returning soldiers to afford a college education, to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that ensured all children equal access to public education, America has achieved greatness through the care and education of its citizens. Perhaps we are reaching the critical mass of opportunity and need necessary to stimulate the next great leap of progress.

Let the debate begin.

Perhaps we are reaching the critical mass of opportunity and need necessary to stimulate the next great leap of progress. Let the debate begin.

ENDNOTES

¹ For a comprehensive discussion of research findings and their implications for policy, see From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development, Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, Eds., Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000.

² Data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey, as cited in Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. (2002). *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2002*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Table POP7.A. <http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/>. And, Urban Institute, 2002 National Survey of America's Families, "Children in Low-Income Families Are Less Likely to Be in Center-Based Child Care" <http://www.urban.org/Template.cfm?NavMenuID=24&template=/TaggedContent/ViewPublication.cfm&PublicationID=8701>

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¹³ L.A. Karoly, P.W. Greenwood, S.S. Everingham, J. Hoube, M.R. Kilburn, C.P. Rydell, M. Sanders, and J. Chiesa, *Investing in Our Children: What We Know and Don't Know about the Costs of Early Childhood Intervention*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1998.

¹⁴ D.R. Denton, *Improving Children's Readiness for School: Preschool Programs Make a Difference, But Quality Counts!* Atlanta, GA: SREB, 2001.

¹⁵ *Abecedarian Executive Summary*, Frank Porter Graham Center, Chapel Hill, NC; L.J. Schweinhart, H.V. Barnes, and D.P. Weikart, *Significant Benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study through Age 27*. Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, No. 10. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press, 1993.; Arthur J. Reynolds, Judy A. Temple, Dylan L. Robertson, Emily A. Mann, "Long-term Effects of an Early Childhood Intervention on Educational Achievement and Juvenile Arrest," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, **Vol. 285 No. 18, May 9, 2001**. Among other results, this study of the Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPC) found that children who attended the preschool program had a 52 percent lower rate of maltreatment by parents than those who didn't. Among children who attended a CPC program, those who attended for more than four years experienced a 48 percent lower rate of maltreatment than those enrolled between one and four years. One of the most important findings was that the greatest difference in maltreatment rates between children who attended a CPC preschool program and those who didn't occurred when the children were 10 to 17 years old – at least six years after enrollment. Since it is well documented that child maltreatment leads to significant social, emotional, and academic distress, this finding is important. Thus, this same study predictably also found long-term significant declines in juvenile crime and dropout rates among program participants. See studies for other details about the magnitude of various gains.

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- ³² See Note 9, above.
- ³³ Lombardi, op.cit.
- ³⁴ Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor, *Occupational Employment and Wages, 2002*, available at: <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/ocwage.pdf>.
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- ³⁷ Child Care for Low Income Families, Chapter 2, National Child Care Information Center, <http://www.nccic.org/pubs/lowincome/chap2a.html>
- ³⁸ “[L]ow-income families who rely on home-based and informal arrangements may be receiving relatively poorer-quality care.” Child Care for Low Income Families, Chapter 3, http://nccic.org/research/nrc_care/chap3c.html.
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