Rising to the Challenge: Building Effective Systems for Young Children and Families, a BUILD E-Book
Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge (ELC) is the major federal funding initiative seeking to support states in developing high quality early childhood systems, especially targeted to children with high needs. Launched in 2011 as a joint initiative of the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, there have been three rounds of major grants under the ELC, with 20 states now participating and funding that totals just over $1 billion.

This federal initiative had particular meaning to the BUILD Initiative and its founders, members of the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative. For more than a decade, BUILD has served as a catalyst for change and a national support system for state policy leaders and early childhood systems development. Not only did BUILD’s work help shape the federal initiative, but it was also the fulfillment of the founders’ most fervent hopes—that states could create detailed blueprints for an early childhood system, with budgets to support significant infrastructure development. BUILD staff, consultants, and many colleagues in the field rose to the challenge and provided extensive support to states as they applied for, and now implement, the federal opportunity.

The Early Learning Challenge supports states in their efforts to align, coordinate, and improve the quality of existing early learning and development programs across the multiple funding streams that support children from their birth through age five. Through the ELC, states focus on foundational elements of a state system: creating high quality, accountable early learning programs through Quality Rating and Improvement Systems; supporting improved child development outcomes through health, family engagement and vigorous use of early learning state standards and assessments; strengthening the early childhood workforce; and measuring progress.

Thirty-five states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico applied for the 2011 round of the Early Learning Challenge grants with nine states initially and then five more selected from this pool for funding. Sixteen states plus the District of Columbia responded to a new 2013 third round of grants; six were selected.

Round 1: California, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Washington

Round 2: Colorado, Illinois, New Mexico, Oregon, and Wisconsin

Round 3: Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Vermont

Since the launch of the ELC, grantee states have rapidly moved from concept to implementation. Through this E-Book, we share learnings from the initial implementation of the efforts, highlighting experience, trends, and reflections stemming from the significant federal investment in this strategic work. The chapters are authored by experts who have worked in tandem with state leaders to gather information. By documenting the experience of the states, captured through interviews with state leaders, Rising to the Challenge provides a source of learning for all fifty states and territories and puts into practice our leadership commitment to continuous learning in the best interests of the children and families to whom we are all dedicated.

Harriet Dichter
General Manager and Editor, Rising to the Challenge

Susan G. Hibbard
Executive Director, BUILD Initiative
Coming of Age:

Joan Lombardi
Jessica F. Harding
Maia C. Connors
Allison H. Friedman-Krauss
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Introduction

What was once a quiet movement led by a relatively small group of people committed to working on behalf of young children and families has blossomed into a revolution in thinking that recognizes the importance of the early years with regard to long-term health, behavior, and learning. While a federal policy focus on the early years has been gaining momentum since the advent of Head Start 50 years ago, it was not until the 1990s that a combination of increasing evidence and advances in science, the growing number of women working outside the home, and philanthropic and political leadership helped propel the issue of early childhood development into the public debate, moving it higher on the domestic policy agenda. The overall goal of this paper is to document some of the highlights of this recent evolution in federal early childhood policy in the United States from 2000 through 2015.

Early childhood is defined broadly as the period from prenatal to age eight. There is a wide range of public policies that impact this period of life which makes any policy review challenging. The policies affecting child development have at least three unique features: 1) they cut across multiple sectors, including health, education, and social protection, among others; 2) they include policies that impact both children directly and their families more broadly; and 3) they are developed at multiple levels: federal, state, and local. In addition, the robust level of activity, particularly in recent years, makes it hard to paint a clear picture of all that is taking place. For these reasons, we chose to focus primarily on five major federal initiatives including 1) the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), 2) Head Start and Early Head Start (including the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships), 3) the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program, 4) Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge and 5) Preschool Development Grants. In addition, we briefly note some of the advances and proposals in early literacy, early intervention, and paid leave.

This review focuses mainly on a select number of policies affecting children before they enter school, yet it is far from comprehensive. We realize we leave out many of the broader policies that also impact the lives of young children, including health and nutrition and many education and child welfare issues. These include, among others, important increases and improvements made in the Child and Adult Care Food Program, outreach to homeless children, child abuse prevention, Department of Defense initiatives for military families and mental health initiatives such as Project Launch and others.

This review starts with a backdrop of policies that emerged in the 1990s. We then highlight the early childhood initiatives during the George W. Bush administration and the advances made during the first and second terms of the Obama administration through 2015. Although this is primarily a linear review chronicling major milestones at the federal level, we recognize that policy development is not linear, but rather there are often ebbs and flows across administrations and across legislative sessions. When looking across this time period, several themes have surfaced that are worth noting. These trends include:

• an increasing role of scientific evidence in the policy debate
• the emergence of a vision for early childhood policy development that reflects the importance of continuity from prenatal through early elementary years
• bipartisan recognition of the importance of the early years
• the establishment of structures and policies that cross health and education, attempts to bridge care and education, and calls for more coordination across sectors and programs
• the increasing role of the state and community levels in early childhood
• rising expectations for program performance, yet limited funding to address quality and expansion
• expanded advocacy efforts to increase investments, scale programs and address quality issues
While interest in the early years is at an all-time high, the resources necessary to comprehensively address the current needs of children and families, particularly low-income families, remains a serious challenge. In many ways, this review ends before the final chapter can be written: without knowing what will happen in the closing year of the Obama administration, how the issues will be addressed in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election, what congressional debate and deliberation will bring, and whether the anticipated resources so important to future generations will be forthcoming. We conclude our review with key challenges and a call for increased political will to secure additional resources so that families will have better options and young children will have access to the early opportunities they so deserve.

The Backdrop: Early Childhood in the 1990s

The 1990s were bookended by two events that were instrumental in bringing renewed attention to the early years: the idea of “readiness to learn” as part of the national education goals announced by President George H.W. Bush and the fifty governors in the 1989 Education Summit held in Charlottesville Virginia, and the publication, in 2000, of From Neurons to Neighborhoods, a report by the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, detailing the science of early childhood development. In between these two events, major state and federal policy initiatives moved forward. In many ways, the 1990s represented an awakening of federal action on child care and early childhood issues that had been slow to evolve in the earlier decades. Emerging evidence and important state and federal legislative action laid the groundwork for many of the policy issues and debates that we see today.

Increasing Scientific Evidence

There were at least three types of evidence that contributed to the early childhood policy dialogue in the 1990s: studies documenting the long-term impact of preschool on later school achievement, studies that raised concerns about whether the anticipated resources so important to future generations will be forthcoming, and the role of policy and advocacy groups in helping make the case for policy changes which can benefit young children and families must be acknowledged. Many coalitions have been developed over the years ranging from the Alliance for Better Child Care in the late 1980s to more recent efforts such as Strong Start for Children Campaign, Grow America Stronger, and Invest in US, among others. In addition, important new advocacy efforts on the part of so many - from law enforcement officials to the business community, from famous athletes to religious leaders - are now intrinsic to the work. Advancements in early childhood policy are due in large part to the tireless and persistent efforts of advocates and experts around the country.

While this review lays out a limited number of federal policy milestones by presidential terms, policymaking is an interactive process that traverses the various administrations and Congresses. It is in this back and forth, this give and take, particularly when a bipartisan consensus can be formed, where real progress is made. There is a much more complete story behind each policy step noted here, involving many members of Congress, committee hearings and negotiations, all of which go well beyond what we have been able to document.

The role of policy and advocacy groups in helping make the case for policy changes which can benefit young children and families must be acknowledged. Many coalitions have been developed over the years ranging from the Alliance for Better Child Care in the late 1980s to more recent efforts such as Strong Start for Children Campaign, Grow America Stronger, and Invest in US, among others. In addition, important new advocacy efforts on the part of so many - from law enforcement officials to the business community, from famous athletes to religious leaders - are now intrinsic to the work. Advancements in early childhood policy are due in large part to the tireless and persistent efforts of advocates and experts around the country.


4 Portillo, C. (1978). Effects on measures of child development, including improved achievement scores, reductions in assignment to special education, and reductions in grade retention. The positive and lasting
findings of these studies continued to be released throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and led to cost benefit analyses that documented the importance of these investments. In addition, increasing evidence pointed to the need to intervene earlier to identify and respond to children with special needs. It was this growing body of evidence that contributed to advancements such as the inclusion of early childhood in the 1989 national education goals and the expansion of state pre-k programs.

At the same time, a number of studies were reported in the late ‘80s and the ‘90s that not only raised concern about the quality of child care, but also pointed to the negative impact that poor quality care can have on the developing child. Among many studies, three stand out. First, The National Child Care Staffing Study detailed the qualifications, working environment and wages of the early childhood workforce, revealing extremely low wages and a great deal of turnover among early educators, as well as highly variable program quality. Findings highlighted the importance of staff wages as the strongest predictor of staff turnover and program quality and the importance of formal education and advanced specialized training in preparing effective teachers. The release of the 1995 study of center-based child care in four states, Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers, documented the poor quality of care available, particularly for children under age three. Finally, the early and ongoing results of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) study on early child care were very influential.

Although implications of these findings were often debated, this study led to a better understanding of the impact of quality on children’s learning and of the importance of the quality, quantity, and type of early care experiences important for children’s early development.

The 1990s also saw a number of reports released by private foundations that helped disseminate research findings, and at the same time began to bring the science behind healthy brain development into the public consciousness. Most notable was Starting Points, a report of the Carnegie Corporation, released in 1994, which focused on the importance of the first three years of life and brought new attention to parenting, children’s health, and the quality of early childhood experiences. Six years later, the publication of From Neurons to Neighborhoods propelled the science of early childhood forward and helped lay the foundation for public policy debates at the dawn of the 21st century.

State Initiatives Set the Stage

While federal policies moved forward during the 1990s, much of the interest and action on early childhood issues—both during this period and into the first decade of the 21st century—took place at the state level. At least three types of policies emerged: state-community 0-5 partnerships, state pre-k programs, and early childhood systems-development efforts. These three types of initiatives helped set the stage for federal action to promote more coordinated early childhood systems and to increase investments in early learning for children zero to five.


State Initiatives Set the Stage in the 1990s

Three types of state initiatives emerged in the 1990s, each having high influence in the decades to follow:

State-Community 0-5 Partnerships. Statewide partnerships linking state and communities toward improved developmental outcomes for young children. North Carolina was an early leader.

State Pre-k Programs. State-funded preschool programs for 3 and 4 year old children. Georgia and Oklahoma were early leaders.

Early Childhood Systems Development. Efforts to conceptualize, coordinate and integrate early childhood services into a cohesive system focusing on equity and quality for children and families. Prominent examples include Quality Rating and Improvement Systems as well as health-child care systems development.

State-Community 0–5 Partnerships. Throughout the 1990s and into the turn of the century, a number of states established statewide partnerships that linked with communities and were focused on improving outcomes for children under five. One of the most celebrated examples of these partnerships was North Carolina’s Smart Start initiative—a pioneering effort launched by Governor Hunt in 1993 to help all children in the state enter school healthy and ready to succeed. Over the years, other partnerships emerged in states across the country, including efforts such as First 5 California10 and First Things First Arizona.11 These partnerships were unique not only because of the cooperation between the public and private sectors, but also because of their broader focus on children 0-5 and the linkages between state and community-level systems.

Expansion of State Pre-k Programs. Along with the focus on 0-5, pre-k funding was expanding during the 1990s. Interest in state pre-k expansion was encouraged through both bipartisan gubernatorial leadership and philanthropic investments to build public awareness. What started as small pilot programs in the ‘70s and ‘80s, started to grow and expand systematically in the ‘90s. For example, in 1995, with support from the state lottery funds, Georgia expanded its preschool program to all four-year-olds in the state.13 With the passing of landmark legislation in 1998, Oklahoma also established a universal preschool program, and within just a few years, over 90% of the state’s school districts were participating in the program.14 Throughout the country, in both “red and blue states,” preschool expansion began to gain traction as we entered the 21st century. In 2001, the Pew Charitable Trusts began a 10-year campaign to advance high-quality, voluntary preschool for all three- and four-year-olds. In 2002, fewer than 700,000 three- and four-year-olds were enrolled in state-funded preschool, and by 2014, over 1.3 million three- and four-year-olds were enrolled in state-funded preschool across 51 programs in 40 states and the District of Columbia. This overall increase in enrollment—nearly double the number of preschoolers—was largely due to improved access for four-year-olds.15

Systems-Building Efforts. Over the past few decades there have been several efforts in the states to try to bring cohesion and a more systemic approach to early childhood policy. For example, in the late 1990s some states began to develop tiered quality rating systems, focused on various levels of quality, to create more “horizontal alignment” across different programs.16 At the same time, some state systems efforts grew out of federal action. For example, in response to amendments to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, there were stepped-up efforts to focus on integrating early intervention into state early childhood systems. Moreover, the federal Child Care Bureau and the Maternal and Child Health Bureau worked together to launch the Healthy Child Care America initiative which brought new attention to the integration of health and child care.17

While the seeds of systems-reform efforts were planted during this period, they did not fully take off until the turn of the century when funds from the Child Care and Development Block Grant, the Maternal and Child Health Bureau, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and philanthropic investments helped to build state systems that coordinated across programs and promoted coordinated governance, quality standards, early learning standards, professional development, and other key infrastructure. For example, in 2002 the BUILD Initiative was launched by the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative, a group of foundations that invested private dollars to advance high-quality early childhood programs through state-level early childhood systems building and promoting the coordination of existing resources and programs for young children. BUILD began with planning in four states: Illinois, Minnesota, New Jersey, and Ohio and then expanded across the country, laying the groundwork for what would later become the federal Early Learning Challenge.

**Landmark Federal Moments in the 1990s**

In 1990, after years of efforts by advocates and researchers to raise awareness of the importance of child care for the growing number of working families, the decade began with the passage of major child care legislation that focused directly on low-income working families. The Child Care and Development Block Grant of 1990 was passed with bipartisan support and signed into law by President George H. W. Bush. Propelled forward by a rare combination of the interests of traditional child care advocates and those more interested in the establishment of a voucher or certificate program to promote “parental choice,” CCDBG reinforced the market-based approach to child care policy. While the inclusion of a quality set-aside in CCDBG was an important step, it was very limited in both scope and requirements. This reality, along with low reimbursement rates set in many states, would impact parents’ ability to access quality care and stand in the way of programming that could better support child development.

During the 1990s, Head Start received renewed attention and funding tripled from 1991 through 2001. In 1994, the Clinton administration convened a bipartisan advisory committee which outlined the need for expansion, quality and coordination. Head Start reauthorizations during this period, in 1990, 1994 and 1998, called for an increasing focus on quality, from the establishment of specific funding set-asides for training and technical assistance to new provisions to increase staff qualifications and address compensation. In addition, the 1994 reauthorization led to a comprehensive revision of the Head Start Performance Standards and the establishment of Early Head Start, launching a major effort to address the needs of pregnant women and families with children under age three.

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Child care continued to be a major issue throughout the decade, particularly with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, more commonly referred to as “welfare reform.” While entitlements to both welfare support and child care assistance were lost, there was increasing pressure to serve low-income working families and those transitioning off of welfare. Congress appropriated an additional $4 billion over five years for child care subsidies and allowed up to 30 percent of the new Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) funding to be transferred to child care.

Although this action put renewed focus on child care, it did little to address the major quality child care issues. To highlight these and other issues, the Clinton administration held two White House conferences in 1997, one on early childhood development and one on child care, which set the stage for the 1998 Child Care Initiative. This initiative proposed a historic $20 billion investment in child care supports for parents through increased subsidy and expansion of the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, expansion of afterschool programs, and increased investments in Head Start, as well as the establishment of an Early Learning Fund— a public-private partnership to support community early childhood efforts for families with children ages zero to five.

While only a portion of the requested funding in the 1998 Child Care Initiative was secured, looking back on what was proposed, one can see the seeds of an emerging vision that called for continuous high-quality services for children from the prenatal period through school entry and into the primary grades.

**Bridging Care and Education: Initial Steps**

The continued split between care and education became increasingly apparent in the 1990s. Both evidence and policy seemed to emerge on separate tracks such that child care was seen as a support for working families, whereas Head Start and state pre-k programs were increasingly understood to have educational benefits for children. Yet during the mid-1990s, initial steps were taken to bridge this false dichotomy. While the major federal child care and state pre-k programs each had very different legislative mandates, there was increased recognition that many of these programs could benefit both parents and children. The Clinton administration took important steps toward creating partnerships between child care and Head Start. At the same time, the launching of the Child Care Bureau in 1995 signaled an early effort to emphasize quality as an essential ingredient for child development by establishing a mission focused on both expansion and quality.

Eventually, efforts emerged in the states to create linkages between child care and pre-k by investing pre-k dollars into community-based child care settings, raising the quality of care and beginning to bridge the two worlds.

25 Id.
Early Childhood Policy 2000-2008

Although states and cities expanded access to publicly funded programs and increased funding for preschool during the first several years of the 21st century, there was little meaningful progress at the federal level in increasing investments for children birth to age five during this time period. However, there were at least three important steps taken during the Bush administration that helped maintain some momentum for early childhood policy: the increasing focus on the importance of early literacy, the Good Start, Grow Smart Initiative, and the 2007 Head Start Reauthorization. Other initiatives also moved forward during this period that had an impact on children, including the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), signed in 2002, and the 2004 Amendments to IDEA. In addition, early childhood research received renewed attention and there was an increasing focus on child outcomes, curriculum and assessment.

Focus on Early Literacy

In July 2001, then First Lady Laura Bush, with Secretary of Education Rod Paige and Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson, convened the White House Summit on Early Childhood Cognitive Development which brought together researchers, policymakers, and caregivers to discuss best practices for supporting young children’s cognitive and language development. During the two-day meeting, Education and Health and Human Services Secretaries Paige and Thompson announced Ready to Read, Ready to Learn, a five-year $50 million, inter-agency initiative to develop a research plan to inform strategies for promoting young children’s school readiness skills, such as pre-reading and vocabulary, including access to well-trained and qualified teachers.

In January 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law NCLB, which had bipartisan Congressional support. Among its provisions, NCLB established the Early Reading First program. Initially funded at $75 million in 2002 and 2003, funding was increased to roughly $100 million annually from 2004 through 2008. Early Reading First distributed grants to develop model, research-based programs to prepare teachers to provide high-quality instruction and activities to support children’s school readiness including language, literacy, and pre-reading skill development. The initiative focused on children from low-income families in order to reduce the income-related achievement gap. Early Reading First supported improvements in teacher and classroom quality and the provision of books and literacy materials to programs.

In addition, the Even Start Family Literacy Program (Even Start) was reauthorized as part of NCLB. Through grants to local family literacy projects, Even Start provided support for adult literacy, secondary education, and English Language Learner instruction as well as parenting education and interactive child-parent literacy activities to support literacy for low-income young children (birth through age seven) and their parents. The program aimed to support parents in becoming involved in their children’s literacy development. However, following the release of contentious evaluation findings funding was decreased and eventually phased out.

Good Start, Grow Smart

During his 2002 State of the Union address, President George W. Bush urged that “we need to prepare our children to read and succeed in school with improved Head Start and early childhood development programs” laying the foundation for Good Start, Grow Smart: The Bush Administration’s Early Childhood Initiative. The Good Start, Grow Smart initiative represented a step forward in efforts to promote a more coordinated systems approach

to early childhood. In launching the initiative the administration acknowledged that all children were not receiving high quality care and outlined three key reasons: 1) most states have limited alignment between what children are doing before they enter school and what is expected of them once they are in school 2) early childhood programs are seldom evaluated based on how they prepare children to succeed in school and 3) there is not enough information for early childhood teachers, parents, grandparents, and child care providers to prepare children to be successful in school. The framework for Good Start, Grow Smart follows:

As a result of the Good Start, Grow Start proposal, the administration invested in more intensive efforts to train Head Start teachers in early literacy and to focus on the child outcomes outlined in the 1998 reauthorization. States began to develop voluntary early learning guidelines that were aligned with K-12 standards and outlined the early literacy, language, reading, and math skills that children should have upon kindergarten entry.

States began to develop voluntary early learning guidelines that were aligned with K-12 standards and outlined the early literacy, language, reading, and math skills that children should have upon kindergarten entry. States also developed plans for child care provider and pre-k teacher professional development in order to further support children’s school readiness. To facilitate this focus on improving quality to support young children’s development, the percentage of federal child care matching funds that states were allowed to spend on state pre-k programs was increased from 20 to 30 percent. In addition, an Early Childhood-Head Start Task Force worked across the Departments of Health and Human Services and Education to provide guidance to states on how best to coordinate services and worked to bring new focus to social and emotional development. Along with these initiatives, the Administration developed the National Reporting System for Head Start, an assessment system which was later discontinued as part of the 2007 Head Start Reauthorization.

**Good Start, Grow Smart Proposal**

**Strengthening Head Start.** Proposed a new accountability system for Head Start to ensure that every Head Start center assesses standards of learning in early literacy, language, and numeracy skills.

**Partnering with States to Improve Early Childhood Education.** Proposed a stronger federal-state partnership in the delivery of quality early childhood programs including asking states to develop voluntary guidelines on pre-reading and language skills that align with state K-12 standards.

**Providing Information to Teachers, Caregivers and Parents.** Proposed partnerships and materials to increase public awareness including $45 million dollars for the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the Department of Education to identify effective pre-reading and language curricula and teaching strategies.

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Early Childhood Policy 2009-2012

The 2008 presidential campaign reflected growing public and political recognition of the importance of supports for early childhood development. From the beginning of the 2008 presidential campaign, there were signs of candidate Obama’s focus on early childhood. In November 2007, Obama referenced research showing the benefits of high-quality preschool in his first major education speech and described early learning as one of his highest priorities in the 2008 presidential debates. For example, in the final debate he stated,

*Early childhood education closes the achievement gap, so that every child is prepared for school. Every dollar we invest in that, we end up getting huge benefits with improved reading scores, reduced dropout rates, reduced delinquency rates.*

Candidate Obama also proposed a $10 billion dollar commitment to early childhood programs. The centerpiece of his early childhood agenda was a proposal to support states’ efforts to create high-quality zero-to-five initiatives that provide support for both early learning and family support services. Candidate Obama’s platform also included complementary initiatives such as quadrupling Early Head Start enrollment, increasing funding for Head Start and CCDBG, supporting home visiting through the Nurse-Family Partnership program, and expanding the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit by making it refundable and allowing low-income families to receive up to a 50 percent credit for child care expenses.

Any progress that has been made, particularly regarding legislation and funding, has benefited from both bipartisan Congressional action as well as executive branch leadership. From the transition on, the Obama administration has kept up a steady drumbeat of activity around early childhood including regulatory, legislative and increased budget proposals. The vision of early childhood focused on children prenatally through age eight and spanned the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education. Any progress that has been made, particularly regarding legislation and funding, has benefited from both bipartisan Congressional action as well as executive branch leadership.

We now turn to five key initiatives during President Obama’s first term: 1) early childhood in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, 2) increased coordination at the federal and state level, 3) quality improvements in Head Start and child care, 4) the establishment of the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program, and 5) the launching of the Early Learning Challenge.

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42 Id.
When President Obama was elected, there was a need for immediate action to address the issues facing young children and families after years of limited funding increases and with an economic crisis sweeping the country. In February 2009, less than a month after taking office, President Obama signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) into law. Designed to stimulate the ailing economy, over $100 billion of the bill’s total $787 billion was directed to federal education programs, with $5 billion designated specifically for early childhood care and education. Funding for Head Start and Early Head Start increased by $2 billion, enhancing the quality of services and increasing the programs’ capacity; funds were sufficient to double the enrollment of infants and toddlers in Early Head Start. Funding for child care through CCDBG also increased by $2 billion, increasing subsidies for families with children ages 0–13 and improving quality. The remaining ARRA early childhood funds were allocated to IDEA to support infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with special needs. Along with these education funds, ARRA allocated an additional $240 million to build new military child development centers.

ARRA also included additional resources for programs to support young children’s health, development, and well-being beginning in the prenatal period. These programs included food and nutrition programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the Emergency Food Assistance Program, and the National School Lunch Program, as well as other financial supports such as child support enforcement and homelessness prevention. In addition, significant resources from ARRA were provided to school districts to improve the quality of education overall.

**Coordination at the Federal and State Level**

While the initial years of the Obama administration were dominated by the economic crisis, the administration took important steps to promote more integration and coordination across agencies at both the federal and state level.

**Interagency Coordination at the Federal Level.** During the transition period of Obama’s presidency, efforts were made to ensure that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. Department of Education worked together. The transition teams for each agency held coordinated outreach meetings and began to plan for a more integrated approach to policy. New positions were created in both agencies, including a Deputy Assistant Secretary for Early Childhood Development, Administration for Children and Families, in the Department of Health and Human Services, with a formal link to the Department of Education, as well as linkages within HHS (Maternal and Child Health Bureau, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) and with other federal agencies. In addition, a Special Advisor on Early Childhood Education was named in the Department of

### Key Initiatives 2009-2012

- Funding and support support for early childhood in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)
- Prioritized coordination between the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education
- Funding for State Advisory Councils
- Head Start and child care quality improvement efforts,
- Launching of the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program
- Launching of the Early Learning Challenge

Education (now the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and Early Learning). This interest in early childhood was backed by the strong commitment and leadership provided by both the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Kathleen Sebelius, and the Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan. The two Secretaries established an Interagency Policy Board to further coordination and dialogue across the agencies and with the White House Domestic Policy Council and the Office of Management and Budget.

State Advisory Councils. Federal initiatives played an important role in encouraging coordination across state agencies. Over the years, coordination was encouraged through federal funding announcements and partnerships. While State Advisory Councils on Early Childhood Education and Care were authorized in 2007 as part of the Head Start Act, they were not federally funded until 2009 with the passage of ARRA, when $100 million was allocated over three years to this effort. The Councils were tasked with developing a high-quality, comprehensive system of early childhood development and care for children from birth through school entry. The purpose was to “eliminate silos, reduce duplication, and increase the availability and efficient delivery of early childhood services.”46 These Councils’ focus was on coordination and collaboration among the wide range of early childhood programs and services, with each Council conducting a needs assessment to define and inform its specific activities. Although some states had already put Councils in place before ARRA, such mechanisms really took hold across the country with the addition of these federal and state funds, helping to expand Councils to 45 states as well as the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and U.S. territories. The tracking and reporting on these state efforts continued throughout the two terms of the Obama administration.47

Tribal Early Learning Initiative (TELI). Along with federal and state coordination, the administration was interested in promoting better coordination across the various tribal programs related to early childhood including American Indian and Alaskan Native Head Start and Early Head Start, Tribal Child Care, and Tribal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting. Formally launched in 2012, four TELI grantees each developed projects designed to build a strong foundation for continued and expanded collaboration across partners in their communities to better support young children and families.48

Quality Improvements in Head Start and Child Care

No early childhood issue received more attention during the Obama years than efforts to ensure that more young children from low-income families benefit from higher quality services—in Head Start, child care, and other programs. The steps taken during the early years of the administration created a foundation and expectation for excellence that cut across different offices and set the tone for years to come.

The Head Start Roadmap to Excellence. As the expansion and improvement efforts in Head Start got underway through ARRA, the Obama administration also released the Head Start Roadmap to Excellence, a landmark effort to ensure that all Head Start programs were providing high-quality services.49 The Roadmap guided the administration in its implementation of the provisions in the 2007 reauthorization and responded to the need to intensify quality improvement efforts following the release of the Head Start Impact Study. In response to a requirement in the reauthorization, and with input from the report of an expert advisory panel convened during the Bush administration, along with input from others, the Obama administration put in place the Head Start Designation Renewal System (DRS), which would identify those programs that were not adequately meeting certain conditions and require them to re-compete for Head Start funds. DRS was formally

47 Id.
launched in the fall of 2011 and has been implemented in various waves throughout the two terms of the Obama administration. The ambitious and far-reaching efforts to assure quality in Head Start and Early Head Start during this time also included the revision of the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework, the development of the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework, stronger accountability and program monitoring, and increased emphasis to establish school readiness goals and to use data to inform practice. At the same time, a network of national centers was put in place to provide the latest information and up-to-date tools to support program components such as teaching and learning; parent, family and community engagement; health; and cultural and linguistic responsiveness. The national centers were redesigned and expanded in 2015 to provide technical assistance in key content areas to child care as well as Head Start, and reflect joint child care and Head Start funding as well as a birth to five focus.

Along with these approaches to improving program quality, new partnerships and innovations were put in place that held promise for not only improving Head Start, but also helping to inform the quality improvement efforts of other early childhood programs. One exemplary initiative, Early Head Start for Family Child Care, developed and piloted strategies for building partnerships. This initial pilot, which built on the lessons from partnerships developed during the Clinton administration, helped reinforce the importance of partnerships between Early Head Start and child care to improve the quality of comprehensive full day programs for infants and toddlers and their families.

Pathways and Partnerships for Child Care Excellence. The Office of Child Care launched an effort to encourage states to raise the bar on quality for children in low-income families across the country. This three-part effort included developing principles for CCDBG reauthorization, improving the state planning and reporting process, and redesigning training and technical assistance. In addition, the administration promoted new partnerships to improve health and safety standards, nutrition, and physical activity in child care and to provide new tools and incentives to expand states’ Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS).

Although the reauthorization of CCDBG did not move forward until the bipartisan Congressional action in 2014 (discussed in more detail below), efforts on child care and key administration principles contributed to the overall focus on quality and continuity. For example, one principle focused on minimizing disruptions to child development and learning by promoting continuity of care. This important principle, reflected in the final legislation, encouraged eligibility determination on a 12-month basis regardless of the working status of the family. Similarly, many of the improvements in the revised state plan application were also reflected in the final legislation. At the same time, during President Obama’s first term, a major effort was made to


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redesign the child care technical assistance network to focus on better accountability in the subsidy system and support for quality improvement systems.

**The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program**

Launching the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV) as part of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in March 2010 was another substantial accomplishment during this period. A total of $1.5 billion was provided to states over five years (2010-2014) for the purpose of achieving key goals to strengthen and improve maternal, infant, and early childhood home visiting programs; improve coordination of services for at-risk communities; and identify and provide comprehensive services to improve outcomes for families who reside in at-risk communities. In March 2014, MIECHV was extended through March 2015, building on the initial investment. In April 2015 Congress passed the Medicare Access and CHIP Reauthorization Act of 2015, which included a two-year extension of the home visiting program through FY 2017.

MIECHV funds were allocated to states using a combination of competitive grants and formula funding based on the number of children ages zero to five in families at or below the federal poverty line. In addition, a tribal home visiting program was funded by a three percent set-aside. Competitive expansion and development grants were intended to expand the scale or scope of evidence-based home-visiting programs, and to improve implementation of current home-visiting programs. In 2010, the first year of MIECHV implementation, funds were awarded by formula to help states begin to plan for implementation, identify at-risk communities, and develop outcome measures and data systems. From 2011 to 2015, formula grants were supplemented by expansion and development grants in states with winning proposals.

MIECHV was one of the first pieces of legislation explicitly focused on evidence-based programming. States that receive MIECHV funding are required to invest in evidence-based home visiting models, with up to 25 percent made available to promising practices. To help states choose evidence-based models, the comprehensive *Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness Review* identified home-visiting models that meet Department of Health and Human Services criteria for an evidence-based early childhood home-visiting service-delivery model. In addition, all states are required to show measurable improvements in maternal and newborn health; school readiness and achievement; family economic self-sufficiency; coordination and referrals for other community resources and supports; reduction in crime or domestic violence, and prevention of child injuries, child abuse, neglect, or maltreatment; and reduction of emergency room visits. In addition, three percent of the total MIECHV funds were reserved for research and evaluation.

Since 2012, the federal home-visiting program has provided more than 1.4 million home visits. In FY 2014, it served approximately 115,500 parents and children in...
The Early Learning Challenge

Groundbreaking efforts in the states helped to increase the demand for federal incentives to promote higher quality care through an approach that would build on existing resources. Originally conceived of during his 2008 campaign, President Obama requested that the Early Learning Challenge Fund be made a part of the budget in the early years of his administration but he was not successful in securing resources for it until 2011. Launched in the summer of 2011 as part of Race to the Top, the Early Learning Challenge was established as a competitive grant program that would award funds to states in order to help them (a) establish successful state systems, (b) develop quality rating and improvement systems, (c) create common early learning standards and assessments, (d) support the early childhood workforce, and (e) measure outcomes and progress. State awards were to be granted based on state proposals for meeting goals to: “(1) increase the number and percentage of low-income and disadvantaged children in each age group of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers who are enrolled in high-quality early learning programs; (2) design and implement an integrated system of high-quality early learning programs and services; and (3) ensure that any use of assessments conforms with the recommendations of the National Research Council’s reports on early childhood.” The initial allocation of $500 million was awarded to nine states in December 2011. Ultimately, the program awarded a total of $1 billion to 20 states. Grants were awarded in three phases from 2012–2014.

Key Elements of the Early Learning Challenge

Through a state systems focus:
- Increasing enrollment of infants, toddlers and preschoolers in high quality early learning programs, with a focus on low-income and disadvantaged children
- Creating a system of high quality early learning programs and services
- Introducing and expanding Quality Rating and Improvement Systems bringing together child care, pre-k and Head Start
- Including early learning standards and comprehensive assessment
- Developing and supporting the early childhood workforce
- Supporting linkages with health
- Improving family engagement and support
- Measuring progress and outcomes

The various chapters of this volume provide more information on the Early Learning Challenge and explore the work it generated around the country.

Early Childhood Policy 2013-2015

The second term of the Obama administration saw not only continuation and implementation of the first-term work but also the announcements of new initiatives, policies and investments. During this period, Congress took bipartisan action on Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program, child care and education reform, and on budget initiatives. We focus on five major events: 1) the President’s Early Learning Initiative and the subsequent implementation of the Preschool Development Grants and the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, 2) the bipartisan reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant, 3) regulatory proposals for both Head Start and child care, 4) the administration’s 2016 budget proposal to support working families and expand early learning and the final bipartisan omnibus spending bill, and 5) the early learning

Groundbreaking efforts in the states helped to increase the demand for federal incentives to promote higher quality care through an approach that would build on existing resources.

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787 counties in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and the five territories. In addition, the Tribal Home-Visiting Program funded 25 American Indian and Alaska Native organizations.

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provisions in the bipartisan authorization of the Every Student Succeed Act (formerly No Child Left Behind).

This work was complemented by ongoing programmatic advances. For example, the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program became a starting point for serving the youngest children across states; new evidence-based models continued to be recognized; research, data collection, and technical assistance moved forward; and the program was reauthorized. In Head Start, designation renewal continued. The Department of Education increased its focus on pre-k expansion, linkages between early childhood programs and the early grades of school, and new regulations for special education. Across Head Start and child care, there was increased coordination of policy and technical assistance and the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services continued their joint administration of Early Learning Challenge grants in 20 states. The White House held a Summit on Early Childhood Education in December 2014. At the summit, the President called on Congress to expand access to high-quality preschool for every child, and proposed investments that would support a continuum of early learning from birth to kindergarten entry. Several innovations were highlighted at the summit including new proposals by the private sector to improve and expand services to young children and families in communities across the country.63

President Obama announced the Early Learning Initiative, which included three central components to improve the lives of the nation’s youngest children: Preschool for All, Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, and expansion of home-visiting programs.64

Following the 2013 State of the Union address, President Obama announced the Early Learning Initiative, which included three central components to improve the lives of the nation’s youngest children: Preschool for All, Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, and expansion of home-visiting programs.64 The proposal called for $75 billion over ten years in mandatory funding for preschool and home-visiting programs to be paid for entirely by a $0.94 federal tax on tobacco products.65 In addition, the budget for fiscal year 2014 included a discretionary spending proposal for Preschool Development Grants, Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, and additional funds for CCDBG to improve child care quality.66

The goal of the administration’s Preschool for All Initiative was to provide access to high-quality preschool for all low- and moderate-income four-year-olds through federal-state partnerships in order to narrow the income-related

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school readiness gap. Funds would be used to improve outcomes for children by enhancing the quality of existing pre-kindergarten programs and expanding the number and availability of high-quality programs. States would increase access to and improve the quality by demonstrating that they have early learning standards across essential developmental domains, high-quality program standards, requirements for teacher and staff qualifications, and the ability to link preschool data with K-12 data. Pre-k classes could be offered in school buildings or through agreements with high-quality community-based providers.

It was envisioned that federal Head Start dollars would complement these efforts by focusing more on services to children three years old and younger.

A broad-based coalition came together to support the administration’s proposals and the congressional efforts to move early childhood forward, particularly through the Strong Start for America’s Children Act. Strong Start was first introduced in the House and the Senate in 2013, calling for access to quality preschool for low- and moderate-income families, and supports for infants and toddlers though an optional set-aside and Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships. While Strong Start was not enacted, the advocacy efforts which took place throughout this period made a significant difference in securing important victories to assure new funding for early childhood and reversing “sequestration” (the 2013 automatic across-the-board spending cuts which had a negative impact on both child care and Head Start). The spending bills passed in 2014 added new resources for early childhood including, among other provisions, increases for Head Start, Early Head Start-Child Care Care Partnerships, funding for Preschool Development Grants, and limited funds for child care. Once again, progress was made through a combination of leadership in the administration, bipartisan Congressional action, and organized and systematic advocacy.

Preschool Development Grants. While the overall Preschool for All proposal did not become a reality, the 2014 Consolidated Appropriations Act included $250 million for competitive grants to states for “improving early childhood care and education, and help[ing] states develop, enhance, and expand preschool programs that are of high quality.” These grants were jointly administered by the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services to support either preschool development in states with limited or no state preschool program or to support the expansion of existing state preschool programs. In the first year, states applied for up to four years of funding to expand access to high-quality preschool to children at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty line. In December 2014, development grants were awarded to five states, totaling nearly $56 million in the first year, and expansion grants were awarded to 13 states, totaling over $170 million. Over 33,000 additional children were expected to be served in high-quality preschool programs in the first year of the program.

Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships. This second component of President Obama’s Early Learning Initiative aimed to provide high-quality early learning experiences to children before they begin preschool at age four. Congress appropriated $500 million in 2014 to foster collaborations between Early Head Start programs and child care providers who meet the Early Head Start performance standards to provide high-quality, full-day, and...
full-year early learning programs for low-income infants and toddlers. The first wave of grants totaled an estimated $413 million and was awarded to 253 agencies across 52 states and territories in December 2014. The remaining funds were awarded to additional agencies on a rolling basis through March 2015. By December 2015, 275 grantees were working with more than 1,100 child care partners and 600 family child care providers across the country, with other partners still coming on line. More than 5,800 teachers in 2,900 classrooms were benefitting from additional investments that were enhancing the early learning environment and providing professional development and the administration expected 32,000 infants and toddlers would be enrolled in these programs at full enrollment. 

Reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant

On November 19, 2014 President Obama signed into law the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014, which received strong bipartisan support in Congress. This was the first significant overhaul of CCDBG since 1996. This long-awaited step forward renewed the program authority through 2020. To improve children’s health and safety, the CCDBG Act of 2014 required states to establish new health and safety standards and to provide pre-service and on-going in-service training on key topics such as first aid, CPR, child-abuse prevention, and prevention of sudden infant death syndrome, among others. States are also required to establish standards for group size and appropriate child-to-provider ratios and provide parents information about access to developmental screening services. States are required to conduct criminal background checks on all staff, ensure that child care providers comply with requirements for reporting child abuse, develop emergency disaster plans, and conduct annual and pre-licensure inspections of all licensed child care providers. In order to enforce these new health and safety requirements, states were required to perform annual inspections of CCDBG providers. Improvements in quality beyond child safety were also a central focus of the renewed CCDBG Act. For example, the percentage of CCDBG funds that states will be required to use to improve quality will increase from four percent to nine percent over a five-year period; and an additional three percent was set aside to improve the quality of infant and toddler care. While this matched the current state average expenditure on quality, this is now set by law, and it brings all states up to the average. Furthermore, the law required that states establish professional development and training requirements to improve the knowledge and skills of Child Care and Development Fund providers and the child care workforce, including ongoing, annual training and a progression of professional development, a focus on social-emotional behavioral intervention models and the incorporation of state Early Learning and Development Guidelines.

The new law also includes important provisions to provide more stability for parents and children through the establishment of 12-month eligibility determination and a gradual phase out of assistance for families whose income has increased, but remains below the federal threshold. Finally, the new law provides more transparent consumer education, including making provider-specific inspection reports available to parents electronically.
are now in the very early stages of implementing the new law, much more time is needed to assess the overall impact of some of the new provisions.

**Regulatory Proposals for Head Start and Child Care**

While legislative action on early childhood issues continued to move forward in Congress, the Obama administration’s second term saw important regulatory proposals emerge for both Head Start and child care.

**Proposed Revision of the Head Start Program Performance Standards.** In the summer of 2015, the Obama administration continued to launch groundbreaking efforts to sharpen and improve the focus of Head Start and improve coordination of technical assistance with child care. As required in the bipartisan reauthorization, Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, the administration proposed a revision of the Head Start Program Performance Standards. The Notice of Proposed Rulemaking provided a comprehensive update of the full set of Head Start Program Performance Standards, aimed to ensure higher standards for curriculum, staff development, and program duration based on evidence-based practice and efforts to improve child outcomes. This included a proposal to increase the minimum hours and days of operation for Head Start preschools to full-day and full-school-year programs, unless a program could demonstrate that a shorter program could more effectively meet the needs of the community. The proposed regulations also aimed to improve program clarity and transparency and reduce administrative burden while maintaining core Head Start principles. At the same time, the administration published a revised Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework, which incorporated the latest research and expanded the outcomes framework to cover children ages zero to five.

**Proposed Rules for the Child Care and Development Fund.** In December 2015, the administration released a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking to address changes made by the CCDBG Act of 2014 and to reflect what had been learned since 1998 about the health and safety of children in subsidized care and the quality of child care settings as well as child development. Among the provisions, the proposed rule aims to: protect the health and safety of children in child care, help parents make informed consumer choices and access information to support child development, provide equal access to stable, high-quality child care for low-income children, enhance the quality of child care and the early childhood workforce and strengthen child care in tribal communities.

Among the many important provisions, the proposed rule includes an annual monitoring requirement for CCDBG licensed and licensed-exempt providers; a pre-licensure inspection for CCDBG providers; comprehensive background checks for child care staff members; additional dissemination of consumer information; the establishment of a minimum twelve-month eligibility period to guarantee families participating in the subsidy system a full year of participation and support, requiring states to take the cost of care into account when setting provider payment rates; and gradually increasing (over a five-year period) the proportion of funds states must use for quality.

**2016 Budget Proposal and the Omnibus Spending Bill**

Once again, 2015 saw important steps forward in funding for early childhood. The President continued to propose significant increases, including stepped-up efforts to expand and improve child care, particularly for infants and toddlers. What was most notable about the congressional budget action was the fact that important new resources were secured for early childhood with bipartisan support during a period when many other issues did not move forward. While the full amounts requested by the Obama administration were not appropriated, given the tight budget constraints and the challenging political climate, early childhood continued to garner support.

**The President's 2016 Budget Proposal.** The growing need for child care was reflected in President Obama’s 2015 State of the Union address when he said: “It’s time we stop treating child care as a side issue, or as a women’s issue, and treat it like the national economic priority it is for all of us.” Obama pointed out that having both parents in the workforce makes child care an economic necessity, but that the cost of child care is currently prohibitive for families participating in the subsidy system a full year of eligibility period to guarantee families participating in the subsidy system a full year of participation and support, requiring states to take the cost of care into account when setting provider payment rates; and gradually increasing (over a five-year period) the proportion of funds states must use for quality.
A significant White House proposal “to make affordable, quality child care available to every working and middle-class family with young children” followed the State of the Union.87 This proposal recognized the crucial role of child care in promoting children’s development and supporting parents to balance work and family obligations. The plan included four primary components. First, the Child Care and Development Fund would be expanded to ensure all families with infants and toddlers and with incomes below 200 percent of the poverty line would have access to quality programs. The administration estimated that by 2025 an additional one million children would be served. Second, the plan would triple the maximum Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit to $3,000 per young child and make this available to families earning up to $120,000. This proposal would affect an estimated 6.7 million children. Third, the proposal would provide resources to states to meet safety and quality standards that were mandated in the reauthorization of the CCDBG. Finally, the proposal would create a new competitive innovation fund ($100 million) to help states design programs to better serve families with unique challenges in finding care, including rural families or those working non-traditional hours.88

The Obama administration also outlined proposals regarding paid leave. In total, 18 states do not provide a single benefit or program to help support families before and after the birth, adoption or foster placement of a child.89 Some progress has been made in this area in state policy. Three states—California, New Jersey, and Rhode Island—passed legislation to offer paid family leave and other states expanded unpaid family and medical leave. The Obama administration proposed a significant expansion of paid leave following the White House Summit on Working Families. The President requested $2.2 billion to support states to implement paid family and medical leave programs. In addition, the administration signaled that it would propose legislation to provide federal government employees with six weeks of paid leave following the birth, adoption, or foster placement of a child. Finally, the President signed a memorandum that directed federal agencies to allow for the advance of six weeks of paid sick leave to their employees.90

87 Id.
89 Id.
Bipartisan Omnibus Spending Bill. In December 2015, Congress overwhelmingly passed an omnibus spending bill that included nearly $1 billion in new money for early childhood. CCDBG funding increased by $326 million, Head Start by $570 million, the Preschool Development Grants received another year of funding at $250 million, and funding was extended for the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program through fiscal year 2017. These new resources will allow early childhood programs to make important improvements and expand during the last year of the Obama administration, improving quality while allowing more Head Start programs to move to full day, expanding Early Head Start–Child Care Partnerships, continuing state efforts to build and expand their preschool programs, and providing some new child care resources to states struggling to serve more families.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

After years of debate about education reform and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), in the closing weeks of the 2015 session Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act with bipartisan support. The law steps away from some of the strong accountability provisions in NCLB and provides more flexibility to the states. A number of new provisions within the law address early childhood. These include, among others, the establishment of a new, revised Preschool Development Grants Program and provisions which encourage greater coordination among early childhood programs. Other new provisions support the continuation of Promise Neighborhoods, as well as the protection and education of children and youth who are homeless, in foster care or the juvenile justice system; and support for full-service schools and 21st Century Community Learning Centers.

Looking Toward the Future

This review touches on some of the key milestones in federal early childhood policies, summarized in Key Milestones in Federal Early Childhood Development Policy on page 21.

The advancements made at the state and local levels have not been fully addressed, nor have the broader policies that impact children and families. Despite these limitations, this review does reveal the breadth of progress on federal early childhood policy and action. Major challenges still exist, including limited access to quality services, particularly for low-income children; the overall concern for quality including the woefully inadequate compensation of the workforce; and the ever-present need for better coordination. Following a brief review of these challenges, we conclude with a call for a bipartisan solution and the political will to secure substantial new financing to meet the needs of young children and families.


# Key Milestones in Federal Early Childhood Development Policy

## 1990s
- **1990**: The Child Care and Development Block Grant becomes law.
- **1993**: Head Start reauthorizations call for an increasing focus on quality.
- **1994**: Head Start reauthorized.
- **1995**: Early Head Start is launched.
- **1996**: The Child Care Bureau is established within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- **1997**: The Clinton administration holds a White House Conference on Early Childhood Development and a White House Conference on Child Care, setting the stage for new early childhood proposals.
- **1998**: The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, more commonly referred to as "welfare reform," passes. Entitlements to both welfare support and child care assistance are lost. Child care investments are increased by $4 billion over five years. President Clinton proposes significant new investments in child care, Head Start, after-school and a new public-private partnerships to support children 0-5 and their families.
- **1999**: Head Start reauthorized.

## 2000-2015
- **2002**: The Bush Administration launches the Good Start, Grow Smart Initiative focused on promoting coordination across programs as well as the development of early learning guidelines and professional development plans.
- **2003**: No Child Left Behind is signed.
- **2004**: Head Start is reauthorized through the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act.
- **2007**: IDEA is reauthorized.
- **2010**: The Maternal and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program is launched as part of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, with $1.5 billion over five years.
- **2011**: The Early Learning Challenge is established as a competitive grant program that will award funds to states. $1 billion is awarded to 20 states through three phases of awards from 2012-2014. The Head Start Designation Renewal System is put in place, which identifies the conditions for re-competition.
- **2013**: Following the speech of the Union address in 2013, President Obama announces the Early Learning Initiative with three central components to improve the lives of the nation’s youngest children: Preschool for All, Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, and expansion of home-visiting programs.
- **2014**: Spending bills passed in 2014 add new resources for early childhood including, among other provisions, increases for Head Start, Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, funding for Preschool Development Grants, and limited funds for child care. $250 million is allocated for preschool grants, and $500 million is invested in Early Head Start-Child Care partnerships.
- **2015**: Congress passes the Medicare Access and CHIP Reauthorization Act of 2015, which includes a two-year extension of the Maternal Infant and Early Childhood Visiting Program through FY 2017.
- **2015**: The growing need for child care is reflected in President Obama’s 2015 State of the Union address when he proposes making quality child care more available and affordable.
- **2015**: In 2015, the Obama administration proposes two new sets of rules: one revising the Head Start Performance Standards and one to implement the reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant.
- **2015**: In December 2015, Congress overwhelmingly passes an omnibus spending bill that includes nearly $1 billion in new money for early childhood.
- **2015**: After years of debate about education reform and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), in the closing weeks of the 2015 session, Congress passes the Every Student Succeeds Act with bipartisan support, including new provisions for early childhood.
Challenges

Expanding Quality Access. Over the past 15 years, efforts have been made to expand access to early childhood services. While expansion was not a priority at the federal level in the first eight years of the 21st century, state investments during those same years helped expand state pre-k for three- and four-year-old children and several state-community partnerships for children zero to five. Yet over the past few years, only limited progress in access to services has been made.

- Today there are more than 2.5 million infants and toddlers living in poverty in the United States, and almost half of all children ages zero to three live in low-income families. Yet two decades after the program began, Early Head Start is still serving less than five percent of eligible families. Moreover, the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV), one of the government’s signature early childhood programs, reached only approximately 115,500 parents and children in FY2014.

- Despite the growth in state pre-k, in the 2013-2014 school year, only 41.5 percent of four-year-olds and 14.5 percent of three-year-olds were served through state pre-k, Head Start, and Early Childhood Special Education.

- More than 25 years after the establishment of the Child Care and Development Block Grant, the program still only reaches one in six eligible families. With funding stretched thin, the number of children served has declined over the past few years. In 2013, the program served fewer than 1.46 million children nationwide, a 15-year low, and total spending on child care assistance—including combined child care and TANF funds—was at the lowest level since 2002. Given important new provisions in the 2014 reauthorization to assure health and safety and improve quality, and limited funds forthcoming, the number of eligible children served is likely to decrease even further in the coming years.

- Funding for special education services, both for Preschool Grants (Part B) and Infant and Toddler Services (Part C) still lags far behind the need for such services.

Despite increased evidence and rhetoric surrounding early childhood development programs and bold new proposals set forth by the administration and early childhood champions in Congress, broad access to early childhood services is still far from reality, particularly for low-income families.

Assuring Quality. Over the past two decades there has been a drumbeat of concern over the quality of early childhood services. The 1990s saw the establishment of set-asides for quality in both Head Start and CCDBG, but with limited resources to address the issue, particularly in child care. Although improving program standards and developing early learning guidelines have been promoted across every federal administration throughout the past 15 years, lack of sufficient funding remains the core issue. Even in state pre-k programs, in 2013–2014 more than half a million children—40 percent of nationwide enrollment—were served in programs that met fewer than half of the quality standards benchmarks recommended by the National Institute of Early Education Research.


This lack of resources is particularly evident in efforts to address a key element of quality: recruiting and retaining a qualified workforce. For example, while the George W. Bush Administration encouraged states to create professional development plans through Good Start, Grow Smart, no additional funds to support these efforts were forthcoming. Although the 2007 Head Start reauthorization stepped up requirements for teachers to have a B.A., funding was not sufficient to assure that Head Start programs could offer high enough salaries to compete with public schools for these highly qualified educators. A study by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment reported that child care workers earn about two-thirds of what preschool teachers earn, and that preschool teachers earned 60 percent of the hourly wage of kindergarten teachers in 2013. Even preschool teachers with B.A. degrees who work in school-sponsored settings earned on average only 80 percent of the compensation of comparably educated kindergarten teachers.103 And the situation is far worse for infant–toddler teachers, who earn less even when controlling for differences in educational attainment.104

**Promoting Coordination.** Progress has been made in promoting better coordination and integration of services across the various early childhood programs. Most legislative proposals over the past two decades have included provisions for agencies at the state level to coordinate services. Recent proposals have called for better alignment of policies across the age span. Partnerships found in Early Head Start and child care, the Early Learning Challenge, the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program and the Preschool Development Grants have been important steps forward. In addition, new governing structures, both at the federal and state levels, have emerged to bring agencies together for planning and policy development.

Despite this progress, much more remains to be done. Continued efforts are needed to bridge care and education programs. These efforts must take more of a two-generation approach that focuses on parents and children together in all programs. This means child care must be seen as an opportunity to promote education, and preschool and primary school should step up efforts to address the needs of families through partnerships with community-based agencies. Moreover, while the bridge between health and education are stronger than ever, these same linkages need to be expanded into the early primary grades.

Federal, state and local agencies must continue to work together across departments and between levels of government. New proposals should provide more alignment across programs on infrastructure issues such as early learning guidelines, standards, data collection and monitoring, with the goal of reaching the highest level of quality in all programs. At the same time, new efforts are needed to promote a bottom-up approach to coordination that recognizes the varying needs of communities and links those to the state and federal level.

**A Call for Increased Financing to Scale Up Quality Services**

With less than one year left in the Obama administration and the 2016 presidential campaign heating up, it is difficult to predict what new developments or changing policies will emerge in the early childhood landscape. What is clear is that we will not meet the challenges facing the early childhood system without renewed political will to significantly increase resources to bring quality programs to scale.

Interest in early childhood is greater than ever. Bipartisan support is seen across the states, with governors of both parties touting the evidence and talking about the importance of the early years to long-term health, behavior and learning. Similarly, the 2015 bipartisan Congressional action on child care and education are very promising signs that policymakers may be able to join forces when it comes to the interests of our youngest citizens.

Yet if there is anything this review has revealed, it is the difficulty of securing the resources to scale quality early childhood programs despite bipartisan legislation. Even when resources were increased, programs were still faced with the difficult and unfortunate trade-off between improving quality or serving more children, but not serving them well. Moreover, some funding initiatives were not


104 Id.
sustained and in other cases looming budget cuts became a constant reality. For example:

- Head Start and Early Head Start funding increased by more than $2 billion over the past seven years, from $6.8 billion in 2008 to almost $9.2 billion in FY 2016 budget.\textsuperscript{105} Yet escalating costs, the need to serve younger children and to provide full-day services, as well as the threat of budget cuts can undermine progress.

- The Early Learning Challenge increased funding to 20 states by $1 billion to assure that more low-income children were accessing higher quality programs. Yet no plans are underway to sustain these funds beyond the four-year funding cycle.

- Funding for CCDBG had been stagnant for years, resulting in a serious decline in real dollars. While ARRA provided a $2 billion increase, it was not sustained. In 2008, CCDBG funding totaled $4.9 billion, and it only increased to $5.4 billion by 2014.\textsuperscript{106}

- While the FY 16 omnibus spending bill recently increased funding by $326 million, including $127 million for infants and toddlers, once again demands to improve program quality will have to be balanced with the need to expand the number of children served. Significant new resources are needed to expand the program to serve more low income working families and to address the issues raised in reauthorization.

- MIECHV provided $1.5 billion over the first five years, and has been extended through 2017, yet funding is still reaching a fraction of the children in need.

- The Preschool Development Grants are only authorized at $250 million.

With evidence mounting that high-quality services can lead to improved child outcomes, once again the rhetoric and reality collide.

As daunting as these realities are, recent developments and rising interest across the country do provide some indication that early childhood policy has “come of age.” The good news is that, for the first time in history, we have a clear vision of what is needed and a set of policy proposals that can take us into the future, towards a pathway of early learning programs that span the prenatal-to-eight period. Some 50 years ago, at the advent of Head Start, we thought that we could address poverty and assure healthy child development with an eight-week summer program. Now we know that there is no quick-fix to the issues facing young children, particularly those from low-income families. Rather, research confirms that we need to start early and assure continuity across the early years.

The United States now needs to make a serious and sustained investment in its young children by securing new mandatory funding streams that grow over time. In the past, such federal commitments—from Social Security to Medicare—helped to provide security to generations of older Americans who would have otherwise faced their senior years in poverty and without access to health care. It is time for the same level of commitment to our youngest and most vulnerable citizens. Expanded financing should encourage creative new partnerships between the federal and state governments and in collaboration with communities and families. It is only by bringing early childhood issues to the top of the domestic agenda that our country can fulfill the promise that every young child brings into the world.


About the Authors

**Joan Lombardi, Ph.D.,** has made significant contributions in the areas of child and family policy for over 40 years, serving as an innovative leader and policy advisor to national and international organizations and foundations and as a public servant. She served in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as the first Deputy Assistant Secretary for Early Childhood Development (2009-2011) in the Obama Administration, and as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and External Affairs in Administration for Children and Families and the first Commissioner of the Child Care Bureau among other positions (1993-1998) during the Clinton Administration. Outside of public service, she served as the founding chair of the Birth to Five Policy Alliance (now the Alliance for Early Success).

**Jessica F. Harding** is a doctoral student in Applied Psychology at New York University where her work focuses how social and educational policies influence the development of low-income children.

**Maia C. Connors, Ph.D.,** is Senior Research Associate, Research & Policy Initiatives at the Ounce of Prevention Fund, where her work focuses on early childhood care and education policy and systems-level supports for high-quality learning environments and teachers’ professional growth.

**Allison H. Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D.,** is an Assistant Research Professor at the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University where her work focuses on early childhood education program quality and children’s cognitive and social development.
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BUILD Initiative Credits

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Forward Ever for All Young Children!