

the dawn of a new era

Investing in early childhood helps America recover and grow

by Joan Lombardi

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Plan provides an important opportunity to help the United States get back on its feet by creating new jobs and supporting programs which provide essential services to young children and their families, while contributing to the economy of the country.

This transforming moment needs thoughtful planning. Community and statewide planning groups must assess needs and create a vision of what they want to accomplish, detailing expected outcomes. The good news is that states have been serving as laboratories of innovation over the past few years so new ideas are emerging everyday. The bad news is that state budgets have been stretched and quality and expansion seriously threatened.

Working across levels of government and funding streams, a plan of action should be put into place with input from a wide range of stakeholders. Investments should be tailored to the needs of children and families most affected by the economic slowdown and in ways

that provide long-term and sustained impact.

A new era calls for a set of guiding principles that can result in a new way of thinking about early childhood. For example, we should:

- move to common standards and supports across early childhood programs
- recognize that low-income children need more intensive and comprehensive services that start earlier to prevent the achievement gap
- provide expanded support for teaching staff
- reach out to parents as a core component of all early childhood services
- design services to meet the needs of working families
- assure continuity across programs serving children 0-8
- link health services to early childhood programs.

Recommendations

Early childhood funding is expected through various federal programs including Early Head Start, Head Start, Child Care and Development Funds, Title I, IDEA, and other education, health, and housing resources. Below

are three concrete recommendations for states and communities to consider:

- **Develop stronger infrastructure across early childhood programs.** Just as the country needs to build transportation and energy infrastructure, now is the time to invest in better early childhood jobs, improved standards and monitoring, more coordinated data, and improved facilities.
- **Better Jobs.** To create better early childhood jobs we need improvements in the higher education delivery system, tuition support, improved compensation, and new ways to provide mentoring and coaching to teaching staff. Special efforts should be made to improve the ability of early childhood teachers to work with second language learners and to promote family literacy.
- **Quality Standards.** With regards to quality improvements, states need to choose or develop a set of common standards that can be used across early childhood programs regardless of funding stream. These standards can be drawn from quality rating systems, state Pre-K standards, and/or Head Start and Early



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Head Start Standards. However, standards alone are not enough; additional resources are needed to meet the standards, to provide technical assistance, and to assure monitoring.

- **Improved facilities.** Good facilities help assure high-quality programs, yet all across the country there is a lack of well-designed spaces for young children. New mechanisms should be created to help programs finance the construction and renovation of buildings and to assure the greening of early childhood programs — from better spaces indoors and outside and to ‘nature-friendly’ curriculum.
- **Coordinated data systems.** Planning for early childhood services is hampered by data collection systems that are not well developed or articulated. Statewide data systems should help assure more comprehensive information about children, programs, and staff.
- **Create Early Learning and Development Programs 0-5, particularly in low-income neighborhoods.** Research confirms that high-quality programs that start early and continue through school entry can have a significant impact on overall child development and learning. Along with investments in other services, many more high-quality comprehensive programs serving children birth to age five could be developed across the county. For example, Early Head Start and Title I or Head Start dollars can be used to create continuous services throughout the early years and/or be woven into community-based child care to address both the needs of working families and the developmental needs of children.
- **Community hubs of support.** In order to take quality to scale and assure more choice for parents, new and existing programs should be designed or redesigned to become a source of quality support to other providers in the community through training, resource support, the establishment of family child care networks and outreach to family, friend, and neighbor care.
- **Continuity with K-3.** An essential component of the new era in early childhood is the development of new linkages with the schools. While a diverse delivery system should continue to be a hallmark of early childhood services, programs should have some relationship with the receiving schools in their neighborhoods. At the same time we need ‘ready schools’ that have smaller classes, better trained teachers, more outreach to parents, new standards and curriculum innovation and an assurance of high-quality after-school services and year-round programming through partnerships with community providers.
- **Redesign child care policies to promote child development and learning.** While child care assistance provides important support to low-income working families, policies have not been designed to promote early education. States should transform child care policies to assure continuity of care, allow grants to programs that meet higher standards, create linkages with health, improve rates and expand eligibility, and assure the development of a network of infant and toddler specialists in every state.

Next steps for federal policy

New investments in early childhood will help America recover and grow. State early learning councils, foundations, and other key leaders in states and communities should take this important opportunity to improve services for young children and their families across the country.

Federal early childhood policy is evolving. Innovations which have been emerging over the past few years, and will increase with the recovery, should inform future federal action. Pending reforms in education, health, and child care all provide new opportunities to address the needs of young children. Along with continued resources, new federal leadership can:

- model interagency coordination
- shine a spotlight on the early childhood profession as a core component of the new American workforce
- establish national benchmarks for quality standards
- help transform early childhood data systems
- create a new national dialogue regarding how best to reach out and support parents of young children
- encourage community-wide programming for quality
- assure that we are supporting and celebrating the diversity of children represented in our country.

Each year more than 4 million children are born in the United States. Two out of five young children will grow up in low-income families; all too many will face developmental risks. We can do better. A new administration, bipartisan support, and continued involvement of the private sector can help us usher in a new era of support for a new generation.