Closing the Opportunity Gap in Early Childhood Education

BY ISAAC S. SOLANO AND MATT WEYER

Achieving equity in early childhood education (ECE)—making sure all children have the resources to be successful in school—is a fundamental goal of international leaders in education. NCSL’s International Education Study Group found that countries whose students scored the highest on international assessments provide additional and personalized resources to young students who need them the most. These countries also enroll students in preschool early, in many cases for three or more years. In the United States, nearly 20 percent of young students do not attend any preschool—a much higher rate than other high-achieving countries.

To engage state legislators interested in closing the opportunity gap for all young students, NCSL is embarking on a two-year grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to tackle issues in early childhood education (preschool through third grade). Central policy issues that will be studied include access to high-quality preschool, teacher effectiveness, school resource allocation, school climate and improvement strategies, and achievement (both progress and proficiency). The project will look at equality versus equity, inputs and outcomes, and gaps in achievement and opportunities.

Equality vs. Equity. Educational equality is providing all children access to early childhood programs independent of quality. Educational equity is providing all children sufficient access to the resources and educational rigor they need to be successful. In sum, equality and equity are not one and the same. Equity may mean providing additional resources to certain students to level the playing field. For example, English learners may receive funding to support their English language acquisition, plus additional funding if they are living at or below the federal poverty level.

Inputs and Outcomes. Early childhood education programs have different inputs, such as access, funding and quality. Structural policies, such as suspension and expulsion and student-to-teacher ratios, can also be considered inputs. The unequal nature of inputs can result in different outcomes for different students and result in school readiness gaps that persist throughout their K-12 education. Outcomes include educational achievement and attainment rates, high school graduation rates and even postsecondary enrollment and completion.

Did You Know?

- Nineteen percent of low-income families enroll in high-quality early childhood education, while 29 percent of high-income families do.
- African-American, Hispanic/Latino and low-income children enter kindergarten, on average, significantly behind in reading and math skills.
- Gaps in math and reading achievement generally persist in fourth grade and are even larger by eighth grade.

Percentage of students who did not attend preschool, 2016

Estonia: 5.3,
Canada: 2.6,
Singapore: 0.47,
OECD* avg.: 5.2,
Finland: 1.7,
United States: 18.4

*Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

Source: NCSL Webinar, 2017
Opportunity and Achievement Gaps. Some children and their families have fewer opportunities when it comes to high-quality education, including access to experienced and effective teachers and adequate school resources. These gaps in opportunity can be considered a significant contributor to the achievement gap.

Creating awareness and dialogue are the first steps in addressing some of the challenges in early childhood education. Advocates for leveling the playing field for young students say increased understanding of these issues is an integral step in achieving better opportunities for all children. Other goals include creating and preserving the benefits of high-quality early childhood education programs through full-day kindergarten, low student-to-teacher ratios, formative assessments, and interventions and early warning systems for students at risk. By better understanding the data explaining the early childhood education context, lawmakers have the chance to craft solutions designed to improve outcomes for all students.

Federal Action

Under the 2015 federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states are required to submit education implementation plans to the U.S. Department of Education for approval. Within these plans, several states are emphasizing the importance of early childhood education with innovative provisions. More states are expected to do so as the second and final round of state plans are submitted to the federal education department in September 2017. Below is a snapshot of some ECE elements from the first round of submissions.

Early Childhood Education implementation plans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Long-term goals</th>
<th>Illinois: By 2025, all kindergartners will be assessed for readiness.</th>
<th>Tennessee: By 2025, 75 percent of third-graders will be reading proficiently.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Louisiana: Develop or identify appropriate assessments and screeners for use from age 3 through grade three.</td>
<td>Massachusetts: Require identification of dual language learners in preschool.</td>
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<td>Student-Focused</td>
<td>Delaware: All children will have high-quality developmental screening and support for effective social-emotional development (including home visiting, access to mental health care and family health services).</td>
<td>Iowa: Consider more emphasis on prevention, provide targeted programs and services to underserved populations.</td>
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<td>Teacher-Focused</td>
<td>Arizona: Early Childhood Education leadership track for professional development (PD), including language, literacy and developmentally appropriate practices.</td>
<td>Michigan: Create professional development systems covering birth through age 8.</td>
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Source: Danielle Ewen, Education Counsel, 2017

Additional Resources

NCSL webpage, Early Learning and Support
NCSL webpage, School Readiness and Transitions
NCSL webpage, Strengthening the Kindergarten-Third Grade Continuum
NCSL webinar, 2017 Preschool-Third Grade Legislative Tracking
National Institute for Early Education and Center for American Progress report, How Much Can High-Quality Universal Pre-K Reduce Achievement Gaps?

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