Overview of the Early Learning Fellows Program

State lawmakers play a critical role in supporting and improving early care and education opportunities in their states. Equipped with compelling brain research and strong economic and evaluation findings, lawmakers are working to improve access to and quality of early care and education programs that are key to children’s development, school readiness and long-term well-being. The Early Learning Fellows program supports this work by convening legislators, legislative staff and researchers to discuss the latest research, elevate proven models and spark new ideas.

The Early Learning Fellows program is designed to support legislators and legislative staff who are experienced or emerging leaders on early care and education issues. The program also serves those chairing or serving on human services, education or appropriation committees who want to expand their knowledge and learn from other legislators and experts across the country.

NCSL staff conducts a rigorous application process beginning in January each year, leading to the selection of participants in the spring. New members are part of a year-long peer learning community in which they exchange ideas, learn about other states’ efforts to support early learning and hear from leading researchers and policy experts to connect the latest innovations to the issues facing their states.

NCSL develops programming for each cohort to incorporate new research developments and policy changes to provide relevant, bipartisan content based on current trends and legislators’ interests. Since 2011, the Fellows curriculum has regularly included sessions and webinars on early brain architecture and cognitive development, best practices in home visiting, early literacy and numeracy skills, developing the early childhood workforce and innovative financing strategies. In recent years, participants have also attended site visits to observe high-quality early learning programs. Early Learning Fellows are encouraged to network with their legislative peers and share successes, challenges and innovations from their states.

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Why Early Learning?

Extensive research on early brain development underscores the importance of the years from birth to age 8 to a child’s lifelong development and success. Scientists have discovered that the most rapid period of brain development occurs in the first few years of life. During this time, the basic architecture of the brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins at birth and continues into adulthood. Research shows that the quality of early experiences is critical for laying the foundation for healthy development and can affect a child’s long-term success in school, relationships and work.

From birth to age 8, children learn and grow at home with their parents and families, in center- or home-based child care, as well as prekindergarten through third-grade classrooms. All these settings are part of a child’s early care and education experience and can lay the foundation for healthy social, emotional and cognitive development. High-quality early care and education is linked to numerous positive outcomes including school readiness, reduced spending on remedial efforts, positive social behaviors and increased earnings over a child’s lifetime. This is especially true for children from low-income neighborhoods and dual language learners. Without access to high-quality early learning opportunities, low-income students are more likely to drop out of school, never attend college, be arrested for a violent crime or become a teen parent.

Bolstered by the rapidly-growing field of neuroscience, child development and evaluation research, state lawmakers have been at the forefront of expanding investments in programs that support the healthy development and school readiness skills of children. There is considerable economic research on the positive returns on investing in early childhood. Studies have estimated that for every dollar invested in early learning programs, the public can expect a return of $2 to $17 depending on the program’s scale, and savings accrued in short-term, intermediate and long-term benefits.

The Legislative Role in Early Learning

State legislators make fiscal decisions to fund early care and education programs through federal, state and local funding sources. Recent increases in federal funding through the Child Care Development Fund and Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five provide new opportunities for states to expand and improve outcomes for early learners. Additionally, the 2015 federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), provides significant authority and autonomy to states to redesign their educational systems and increase support for early learners. Under ESSA, every state is required to submit plans detailing how they will comply with the law, providing state legislators the opportunity to support their state and local education agencies in improving outcomes for the youngest students.

As states consider how to address and improve their early care and education systems and outcomes, they are also faced with limited budgets, teacher shortages, barriers to accessing high-quality and affordable child care and significant gaps in school readiness based on socio-economic status and race. State legislators play an important role in addressing and solving these complex issues.

The Early Learning Fellows program is designed to equip legislators and staff with the tools to tackle early care and education policy issues in their states. Participants attend two in-person meetings and two webinars, offering a chance to introduce early learning topics and reinforce learning through collaboration. Participants are polled on their topics of interest and meetings are organized to provide a broad base of programming to foster deep learning and robust discussion.
Who are the Early Learning Fellows?

Since 2011, NCSL has convened seven cohorts of Early Learning Fellows. These legislators and legislative staff are nominated by state legislative leadership and submit applications for review. Fellows are selected by NCSL staff based on their application content as well as geographic and party representation. Cohort sizes range from 23 to 37, which ensures high-quality small group dynamics while preserving broad representation. As of 2018, 189 legislators and 25 legislative staff representing 48 states and two territories have participated. NCSL has hosted 13 in-person meetings, 16 webinars and five site visits, as well as published 28 blogs and newsletters for the Fellows program. The legislative alumni represent a balanced cross-section of party and chamber representation.

Early Learning Fellows discuss issues at a meeting in 2018.
The Effect of the Early Learning Fellows Program

Participants are given time during both meetings to reflect on what they have learned from the presenters and discussed with their peers, leading to the development of an individualized early learning plan that includes top priorities and next steps for their individual states.

Many participants have returned to their state legislatures and raised awareness around the importance of early care and education. Some have done this by creating bipartisan legislative groups, such as the Wisconsin Children’s Caucus led by Representatives Joan Ballweg (R) and Jill Billings (D), both alumni of the program. Others have created task forces and commissions, such as Louisiana’s Early Childhood Care and Education Commission, which was established by legislation championed by Representative Stephanie Hilferty (R).

Alumni have introduced legislation on early care and education topics to expand opportunities, raise quality and support the early care and education workforce. Program alumni have filed 179 bills and resolutions related to early care and education, including 45 enactments and adoptions.

Select Legislation Enacted by Alumni

Over the years, Early Learning Fellows have introduced legislation in several early care and education areas including improvements in access and quality, teacher certification, discipline and streamlining existing systems to name a few.

In 2017, Indiana Representative Robert Behning (R), a member of the first class of Early Learning Fellows in 2011-12, authored and passed legislation to expand early learning opportunities for 4-year-olds. HB 1004 provides incentives to improve program quality, expands a prekindergarten pilot program and eligibility requirements and adds educational outcome monitoring and reporting requirements.

Texas Representative Dan Huberty (R), a 2014 Early Learning Fellow, sponsored HB 2039 in 2017. HB 2039 created an early childhood teacher certification for prekinder-
garten through third grade. The bill passed with bipartisan support and was signed into law. The certification includes skills-based courses on educating younger learners including managing a classroom, strategies for teaching reading, writing and numeracy and focusing on building social, emotional and academic skills in small groups.

Early Learning Fellow alumni in Tennessee and Ohio introduced legislation in 2017 to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline for young learners. In Tennessee, Representative Raumesh Akbari (D), a 2015 Early Learning Fellow, sponsored and passed HB 872, which prohibits the suspension or expulsion from school of a prekindergarten or kindergarten student, unless the student’s behavior endangers the physical safety of other students or school personnel. Ohio Senators Peggy Lehner (R) and Gayle Manning (R), both 2016 Fellows, cosponsored SB 246, creating the Supporting Alternative for Education—or SAFE Act—to prohibit certain suspensions and expulsions of students in prekindergarten through third grade and requiring each public school to implement a positive behavior intervention and supports framework in accordance with state standards. (As of November 2018, this bill is currently pending.)

In 2018, Washington, D.C., Councilmember Robert C. White Jr., a 2017 Early Learning Fellow, supported the passage of the Birth-to-Three for All D.C. Amendment Act, which increases the available city funding for early childhood development providers, improves the pay system for child development educators and creates new government positions to help providers obtain or renew a child development facility license. The bill also strengthens pre- and post-natal support for D.C. mothers.

What’s Next for the Early Learning Fellows?

At the close of each year, Early Learning Fellows join a large network of program alumni. Alumni receive regular updates from NCSL staff highlighting legislation passed by their peers, relevant research and reports on early learning topics, and invitations to participate in and present on webinars, meetings and other peer-learning groups.

Many Early Learning Fellows alumni participate in NCSL advisory groups that dive deeper into prenatal through age 8 policies and systems. Eight Early Learning Fellows participate in NCSL’s Prenatal-to-3 Legislative Advisory Group. This bipartisan group of 11 state legislators and staff, researchers and NCSL staff convened three times in 2018 to develop a framework to support legislative work in states on prenatal-to-age-3 policy issues. The forthcoming framework will outline specific roles and policy options for legislators across the country to consider when advancing

“Studies show students who participate in structured, high-quality pre-K programs have a jump start on their academic careers. In many cases, there can be an 18-month achievement gap among 10-year-olds who did not participate in some form of early childhood education. With Indiana’s 2017 legislation, we were able to expand our pre-K pilot program from five counties to 20, broadening access to almost 2,300 additional at-risk 4-year-olds, primarily in rural counties.”

—Representative Robert Behning (R-Ind.), author of 2017 HB 1004, Early Learning Fellow, 2011-12
prenatal-to-age 3 legislation. Members will also support the development of a communication strategy and technical assistance package so that the framework reaches policymakers throughout the country.

Additionally, five Early Learning Fellow alumni serve on NCSL’s State Policy and Research for Early Education (SPREE) Working Group. NCSL began convening this group of legislators, staff and researchers in 2016. SPREE members released a report, A Fair Start: Ensuring All Students Are Ready to Learn, in January 2018, that discusses the importance of supporting children’s early development and closing the school readiness gap, caused by lack of educational opportunity, so each child can reach their full potential. The report also introduces the SPREE framework—the prioritized principles of early learning systems—including equity, high-quality prekindergarten-through-third-grade education, governance, community and family engagement and educator development. The report also provides policy strategies for each principle and legislative examples.

The Early Learning Fellows program has prepared legislators across the country to address early care and education issues in their states and will continue in 2019 with its eighth cohort. Visit the Early Learning Fellows website for more information.

The Early Learning Fellows program model has been replicated in other policy areas at NCSL, including the Opioid Policy Fellows, Child Welfare Fellows, Education Finance Fellows and a Maternal and Child Health Fellows program launching in early 2019.

“I was indeed grateful to be selected to participate in the Early Learning Fellows program. It was rewarding to be in a room with many individuals with like minds on early childhood education even if we are not all able to fund it to the max. I enjoyed the session on the brain development and parent/child bonding which needs to be shown to every new parent, especially during this time of expanding technology. The program allowed me to gain more knowledge on where we in Louisiana should be heading regarding early childhood education.”

—Representative Patricia Haynes Smith (D-La.) Early Learning Fellow, 2016
The National Conference of State Legislatures is the bipartisan organization dedicated to serving the lawmakers and staffs of the nation’s 50 states, its commonwealths and territories.

NCSL provides research, technical assistance and opportunities for policymakers to exchange ideas on the most pressing state issues, and is an effective and respected advocate for the interests of the states in the American federal system. Its objectives are:

- Improve the quality and effectiveness of state legislatures
- Promote policy innovation and communication among state legislatures
- Ensure state legislatures a strong, cohesive voice in the federal system

The conference operates from offices in Denver, Colorado and Washington, D.C.