



## Trends in Early Learning

By Steffanie Clothier and Caroline Smith

*States are promoting young children's healthy development and early learning.*

*States use many different strategies to improve early learning.*

Breakthroughs in scientific knowledge, combined with successful state experience have helped lawmakers across the country engage in new efforts to promote young children's healthy development and early learning. Major trends in early learning include multi-strategy approaches to support at-risk children in the first five years, increased funding for prekindergarten, focused approaches for infants and toddlers, quality rating systems, and significant private sector leadership in new public-private partnerships.

**State Action Multi-Strategy Approaches.** States are increasingly using many different approaches to improve early learning among children in their first five years before kindergarten. Ohio increased funding to improve early learning, support parents, and improve child health and development. Biennium funding for 2008-2009, which increased by more than \$274 million, included increases in funding for child care eligibility, reimbursement and quality; scholarships for early childhood teachers; mental health treatment services; expansion of Help Me Grow for infants, toddlers and their parents; and expansion of child health insurance eligibility. Washington lawmakers moved forward in the 2007 legislative session to appropriate \$130 million in new funding for child care reimbursement rates, professional development, a quality rating system, prekindergarten, home visiting services, and funding for the Early Learning Council and public-private partnerships. Legislators also passed a law to create paid family leave for all new parents.

Since 2004, Illinois lawmakers have increased funding by \$252 million to support a comprehensive strategy to improve child development and early learning. The Illinois Early Childhood Block Grant supports the full age range from birth to age 5 by funding prekindergarten, parent training, and prevention programs. An 11 percent set-aside of the funding provides coordinated, research-based child development and family support services to at-risk infants, toddlers and their parents. Other states that fund a multi-strategy approach include Arizona, Arkansas, Connecticut, Kansas, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and South Carolina.

**Prekindergarten.** In 2007, state lawmakers continued to increase funding for prekindergarten. In New York, lawmakers increased funding by \$146 million; Pennsylvania added \$75 million; and

### Major Trends in Early Learning

- Multi-strategy approaches to support children in their first five years.
- Increased funding for prekindergarten.
- Focused approaches for infants and toddlers.
- Quality rating systems for child care settings.
- Public-private partnerships.

Arkansas lawmakers increased funding for the Arkansas Better Chance for School Success program by \$40 million. Lawmakers in Iowa appropriated \$15 million in funding increases each year for the next four years. At full implementation, Iowa's prekindergarten program will fund 90 percent of all eligible children. Other states with significant increases in prekindergarten funding in 2007 include Alabama, Colorado, Connecticut, Louisiana, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Tennessee and Washington. These increases follow the previous two legislative sessions, in which the combined increase totaled close to \$1 billion. High-quality programs in Arkansas, Georgia, Illinois, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oklahoma and Tennessee are setting the standard for state prekindergarten, as rated by the National Institute for Early Education Research.

*States continue to increase funding for pre-kindergarten.*

**Infants and Toddlers.** Research abounds about the importance of the earliest years for language development, social and emotional skill growth, cognitive learning and physical development. Lawmakers are helping to improve children's experiences in child care and to provide support for parents. State policies and new funding for child care are being directed to early childhood specialists to support providers who serve infants and toddlers; new teacher credentials; mental health consultants; and support for home-based child care providers. States also are funding various home visiting and parent education programs to support parents. Many states that use multiple approaches are funding home visiting programs as one part of their strategy. During the 2007 interim, two legislative committees in Iowa are exploring ways to improve home-based care and to support parents.

*State programs support infants and toddlers and their parents.*

**Quality Rating Systems.** At last count, 42 states are developing or implementing quality rating systems to improve child care quality. Indiana, Rhode Island and Washington are the latest states to pass laws or budget measures to do so. This policy approach has caught on across the country as lawmakers seek ways to improve children's development and learning in child-care centers and is emerging as an effective way to improve care for infants and toddlers. Quality rating systems grade child-care settings based upon established indicators using a symbol—such as a star rating—to indicate a center's level of quality. With quality ratings, child-care providers have an incentive to raise the level of care they provide, parents can more easily identify higher-quality settings for their children, and policymakers have a way to measure improvements.

*Currently, 42 states are developing or implementing quality rating systems.*

**Private Sector Involvement.** Policymakers have a new ally in their effort to improve early learning. Private businesses and foundations are engaged in new public-private partnerships. In Nebraska, lawmakers combined private funds and state funds to create the Early Childhood Endowment Fund to provide services for children ages birth to 3. In Oklahoma, private funds have leveraged matching state funds to support improvements in early childhood professional development and to expand services for young children. In Washington, private foundations and major corporations pooled funding to create a new entity, Thrive By Five, that is working with a new state agency to improve early learning. Other states where the private sector is engaged in early learning include Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Vermont and Virginia.

### **Contacts for More Information**

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