

Improving Early Learning: State Legislative Actions in 2018

BY ADRIENNE FISCHER

In response to research showing that the years between birth and age 8 are [crucial to a child's physical, social and mental development](#), government efforts to bolster early education are on the rise. While federal and local governments often support early education, state-led initiatives are the most common approach to building strong early learning systems. During 2018 state legislative sessions so far, 58 laws addressing early education have been enacted. The most frequently covered topics can be summed up as follows:

- **Preschool**—improving access to and quality of early learning programs for 3- and 4-year-olds.
- **Dual language learners**—bridging language barriers and improving school readiness among young nonnative students with limited English.
- **Governance**—streamlining interagency cooperation; improving the collection, sharing and integration of data; and establishing authority for early learning administration.
- **Early literacy**—promoting early reading skills, diagnosing learning disabilities and aligning education systems to achieve reading competency by grade three.
- **School discipline and social and emotional learning**—limiting suspension and expulsion practices in preschool through third grade (P-3) and establishing culturally sensitive approaches that promote positive behavior.
- **Educators and professional development**—creating career pathways for licensing, offering training and increasing the compensation of early childhood educators.
- **Family engagement**—promoting parental involvement in P-3 and establishing two-generation strategies, such as providing oppor-



tunities for parent education and workforce development.

- **School readiness**—establishing benchmarks and readiness assessments to ensure students enter kindergarten ready for success.

State Action

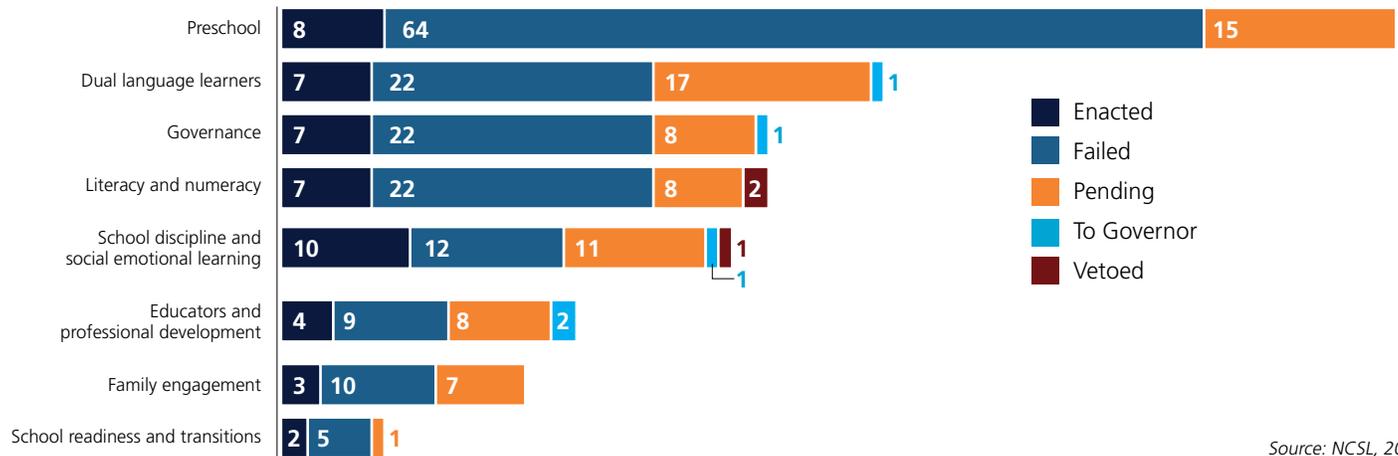
Many of the policies addressing access to and quality of early education programs are crafted at the state level. During the 2018 legislative sessions, 45 states filed 372 bills covering P-3 topics, resulting in 58 enactments. Innovative strategies can be found across the spectrum of policy areas, with states finding creative ways to improve early learning outcomes. The following are a few examples of state policies enacted this session:

- Combining multiple policy strategies, Connecticut's [State-Wide Reading Plan](#) aligns the state's coordinated reading plan for students in kindergarten to grade three with its existing two-generation initiative. The program aims to support families by helping parents with workforce and education needs while providing children with early learning opportunities. This initiative promotes coop-

Did You Know?

- Since 2002, annual state spending on preschool [has increased from \\$2.4 billion to \\$7.6 billion.](#)
- [Nineteen percent](#) of the nearly 20 million children under age 5 in the U.S. live in poverty.
- [Forty-eight percent](#) of children from [low-income families](#) are [ready for school at age 5](#), compared with 75 percent of children from families with moderate and high incomes.

Categories, Numbers and Status of Bills Addressing Early Learning



eration between agencies, streamlines data sharing and minimizes duplication of efforts to improve reading outcomes, an important indicator of subsequent educational success.

- Louisiana recently established the [Early Childhood Care and Education Commission](#) to administer early learning systems in the state. The commission has 26 members representing the legislative, nonprofit, business, academic, workforce and education sectors. Before the 2019 legislative session, the commission is tasked with reporting its findings and recommendations to the governor, Legislature and state education officials to improve the availability, quality and cost of early care and education programs.
- As part of its [Task Force on Trauma-Informed Care](#), Oklahoma is promoting positive disciplinary interventions in early childhood settings. These include producing recommendations and guidelines to reduce the incidence of exclusionary discipline practices in early learning programs.

Federal Action

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), enacted in 2015, provides flexibility to states to use federal funding to prioritize early learning. Below are some examples of opportunities through ESSA and other federal programs for states to support early learning:

- The Administration for Children and Families (ACF), in coordination with the Department of

Education, recently announced the [Preschool Development Grants Birth through Five](#). The program will award \$242 million under ESSA for states to coordinate existing early care and learning programs. Applications are due Nov. 6, 2018.

- Title I, Part A of ESSA allows local school districts and elementary schools to use Title I funds for preschool, provided they meet certain performance standards. All states, regardless of whether they choose to apply Title I funds toward preschool, must report preschool enrollment numbers to the U.S. Department of Education.
- The [Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation \(LEARN\) Program](#) is aimed at improving achievement in reading and writing. It authorizes the secretary of education to provide grants for evidence-based literacy instruction for students from birth through grade 12.
- The [Child Care Development Block Grant \(CCDBG\)](#) program distributes formula-based grants to states for child care services and quality improvement. Approximately two-thirds of this funding serves children up to age 5, many of whom participate in early learning programs. The Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 doubled CCDBG funding from \$2.9 billion to \$5.8 billion for fiscal years 2018 and 2019. [Estimates indicate](#) that this increase will provide child care assistance to an additional 230,000 children across the country.

Additional Resources

- NCSL webpage, [P-3 Bill Tracker](#)
- NCSL webpage, [Early Learning and Support](#)
- NCSL P-3 Working Group report, [A Fair Start: Ensuring all Students Are Ready to Learn](#)
- American Institutes for Research, [ESSA: Early Childhood and Development](#)
- Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes, [The State of Early Learning in ESSA](#)

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