



## Did You Know?

- Of the roughly 3,000 education innovations captured by [The Brookings Institution](#), two-thirds involve playful learning.

- The U.S. is below the [average enrollment rates](#) for 3- to 5-year-olds in early learning programs across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development member countries. It remains at 66% while OECD average enrollment rose from 76% to 86% between 2005 and 2017.

- More than 50% of states whose governors highlighted their state's commitment to improving early childhood education in their 2019 State of the State addresses passed bills related to ECE.

## States Elevate Early Learning

BY JORGE E. CASARES

With studies showing that children who start school early in life do better both in and out of the classroom, more and more states are acting to boost high-quality early learning opportunities. As states continue to invest in young children's long-term success, attendance in early learning programs is growing. In a recent [study](#) by the National Center for Education Statistics, researchers found that the percentage of 3- to 5-year-olds attending full-day preschool programs rose from 47% to 56% between 2000 and 2017, while the percentage of 3- to 5-year-olds attending full-day kindergarten grew from 60% to 79% during that same time.

As the country continues to see an increase in the number of children attending state programs and a growing need for skilled teachers to educate them, legislatures are employing a multitude of policy options to improve early education.

### State Action

During the 2019 legislative session, 49 states introduced 496 bills and resolutions related to early learning, with 87 bills enacted in 29 states.

Several states, such as [Alabama](#) and [Rhode Island](#), are taking steps to expand access and better connect and integrate preschool into the K-12 system. Alabama expanded the [Pre-K-3rd Grade Integrated Approach to Early Learning](#) through its Strong Start/Strong Finish initiative, and Rhode Island improved coordination by aligning curricular standards between prekindergarten and its K-12 system. Such alignment has been [considered increasingly important](#) in reducing the "fade out" of cognitive gains made by preschool children as they progress through the elementary school system.

In addition to taking steps to integrate preschool into overall education systems, six policy trends appear in the legislation being considered and passed by states. They include early childhood education governance, literacy standards, school finance, teacher workforce, social and emotional health, and school discipline.

[New Mexico](#) and [Utah](#) enacted legislation that renews the governance structures overseeing early learning. This year New Mexico created the Early Childhood and Care Department to expand access to high-quality, effective early prekindergarten and pre-K programs by consolidating program manage-

ment previously located across multiple departments. In Utah, the Early Childhood Utah Advisory Council and Governor’s Early Childhood Commission were created to coordinate and improve the quality of programs and services for low-income households.

The 2019 Alabama Literacy Act took steps to improve the reading proficiency of public school students by the end of third grade. The act provides targeted intervention by the recently revised Alabama Reading Initiative’s local reading specialists and the state’s Summer Achievement Program.

Other states passed similar legislation to provide intensive supplemental services for nonproficient students, with Oklahoma and Nevada implementing retention policies for students, and Wyoming concentrating on reading screenings to identify students with challenges. In Georgia, the state department of education is responsible for developing a dyslexia informational handbook and professional development to equip teachers with evidence-based intervention strategies and knowledge of the state’s response-to-intervention processes.

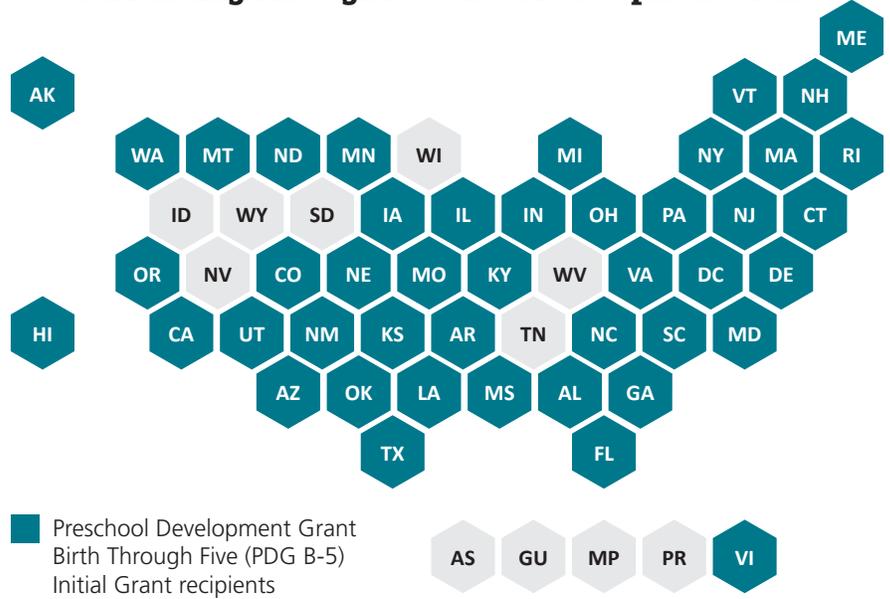
To supplement the funding and resources available to local school districts, Minnesota HB 1a appropriates \$7.95 million in 2020 and 2021 to leverage federal and private funding. The funding aims to support members of the Minnesota Reading Corps program, which trains and teaches early literacy skills to children from age 3 through third grade. Additionally, the bill supports the Minnesota Math Corps over those two years.

Many states have also focused on opportunities to build and improve their teacher workforce, as through Grow Your Own Illinois or Colorado’s educator loan forgiveness program.

Some states passed legislation that addresses the social and emotional health of students. In Colorado, HB 1017 created the K-5 Social and Emotional Health Pilot Program to determine the effect of dedicated school mental health professionals in up to 10 elementary schools that educate high-poverty, underserved students. Maine and Washington established a task force and social emotional learning committee, respectively, to improve the ability of staff and administrators to respond to childhood trauma and promote awareness, resiliency and other skills that support healthy student lifestyles and relationships.

States have also sought to address school discipline policies for the early years. Beginning this year, Colorado will prohibit students in preschool through second grade from being suspended or expelled, except for certain offenses related to physical harm or the credible threat of such harm to others and other aggravating circumstances.

## Federal Funding Through Preschool Development Grants



Source: U.S. Department of Health & Human Services

## Federal Action

The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) created opportunities for states to improve their early learning systems. In particular, the act codified the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) to provide federal funding to help states build on their existing infrastructures and resources.

This year, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in consultation with the U.S. Department of Education, released a new grant opportunity. It is meant primarily for states and territories that did not receive an award under the 2018 release of the PDG B-5 Initial Grant. The ACF will award up to five grants, totaling \$36.5 million, at the end of 2019.

The 44 states and two territories granted awards under the first release of the initial grant were eligible to apply for PDG B-5 Renewal Grant awards of up to \$15 million this year. These awards aim to increase the school readiness of low-income and disadvantaged children. This will be done by expanding access to high-quality early childhood care and education, enhancing coordination and collaboration across state programs, and focusing on student transitions from early childhood programs into elementary school. The ACF expects to distribute 23 awards.

## NCSL Contact

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## Additional Resources

- [NCSL’s Preschool through 3rd Grade Legislation Tracker](#)
- [NCSL’s Early Learning and Support webpage](#)
- [ABCs of Federal Early Learning and Care Funding Streams, First Five Years Fund](#)
- [“The Condition of Education 2019,” Institute for Education Sciences](#)
- [“Using Local, State, and Federal Dollars to Improve Pre-K to K Transitions,” New America](#)
- [“Child Care and Early Education: Most States Offer Preschool Programs and Rely on Multiple Funding Sources,” United States Government Accountability Office](#)