Improving Early Learning: 2020 State Policy Actions

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The COVID-19 pandemic has stressed state education systems in many ways, including disrupting the education of early learners in 2020. This fall, fewer than anticipated students entered K-12 classrooms and kindergarten programs across the country experienced lower enrollment rates. In preschool classrooms, participation rates were down by 50%. Additionally, throughout K-12 education, parents have chosen to homeschool their children, while in-person classrooms are learning to manage social distancing restrictions. Inside virtual classrooms, teachers have struggled with how to provide meaningful remote instruction and social emotional support to their young students remotely.

All these pandemic outcomes have created new types of inequalities and exacerbated existing deficits for the most vulnerable students. This year, states continued to work on making their early education systems more equitable and effective for all students.

State Action

More than 300 early learning bills were introduced in 45 states in 2020, with over 100 enactments. They addressed topics ranging from funding and governance to expulsion and literacy.

Colorado’s HB 1427 provides funding to improve rural education and significantly expand access to preschool programs through increased taxes on nicotine products. The legislation was approved by two-thirds of Colorado voters via ballot measure. For the first three years, revenue from this ballot measure will be used to develop a Rural Schools Cash Fund, which will distribute funds to large and small rural districts (and associated charter schools) at a per-pupil rate. By 2023, the additional nicotine tax revenue will go toward providing every child in Colorado with at least 10 hours of voluntary preschool per week in the year prior to entering kindergarten.

Expulsion from an early learning program...
has been shown to have a lifelong impact on students, resulting in decreased interest in school, lower academic performance and achievement, and lower earnings in adulthood. Hawaii’s HB 1346 continues a national trend of statutorily prohibiting the suspension of children participating in public prekindergarten programs—except for extreme and persistent cases in which school administrators are asked to consult with the Executive Office on Early Learning. Hawaii joins at least 16 states and the District of Columbia that have limited or prohibited the suspension and expulsion of children in early schooling.

The state of Idaho passed HB 555 to focus on delivering literacy intervention in a personalized manner. Idaho school districts will deliver evidence-based interventions with the intent of improving parental engagement, which has been shown to improve outcomes for children. Using adaptive learning technology for literacy intervention, the state plans to improve academic outcomes for early learners through grade three. Similarly, Wisconsin enacted SB 595 to provide computer-based instructional programming for children transitioning to kindergarten in rural school districts.

Changing the governance of a state’s early learning system can help eliminate inequalities by leveraging the whole child approach so the child can arrive in the classroom ready to learn. This includes addressing all of a student’s needs, including housing, health care, nutrition and other factors. As an example, Louisiana’s HB 251 will create an Early Childhood Care and Education Commission to improve the existing programs and systems created by Act 3 of the 2012 Louisiana legislative session. The law requires the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to create an integrated network to manage and oversee the state’s early learning services. The commission will be composed of 41 members.

**Federal Action**

The U.S. Department of Education renewed its Ready to Learn competitive grant program for fiscal year 2020. Ready to Learn will produce programming for television and other mass media to promote school readiness and math skills in young children, ages 2-8. Given the current pandemic and shortfalls of support outside of in-person instruction, eligible public telecommunications services were invited to produce curriculum-based educational television and digital media. The goal is to improve literacy, expose children to workforce options, promote intergenerational learning, and bridge the divide between digital play and real-world engagement. Last offered in 2015, the grant competition plans to build on past grant cycles, this time focusing more clearly on reaching diverse communities through a wider range of media and platforms.