

The following is an abridged version of the article “Birth to 5 and Beyond: A Growing Movement in Early Education,” published in the July 2006 issue of the *Zero to Three* Journal. The July 2006 issue, which will be available at the end of July, is entirely focused on public policy and can be purchased by visiting the [ZERO TO THREE website](#) or calling 1-800-899-4301.

## **Birth to 5 and Beyond:** *A Growing Movement in Early Education*

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Across the United States, interest in early childhood development continues to grow. In creating a more holistic and responsive system of early education, states and communities are recognizing that these efforts must start with ensuring a healthy pregnancy and birth, continue with a focus on the first 5 years and on through the kindergarten and the primary grades. Although we all know that the early years are critical to later success in school and in life, there is no magic year that alone can ensure this success. Instead young children need access to health care, strong families, and positive early learning experiences from birth to 5 and beyond.

Historically, early childhood education has grown through multiple funding streams which addressed various policy goals and populations. Examples include Head Start, child care, and state pre-kindergarten, as well as health and family support services. It is only in recent years that there has been an effort to “connect the dots” to develop more unified and comprehensive early education systems.

### **Creating a State Early Childhood System Birth to 5**

A comprehensive early childhood development system can take many forms as it reflects the unique needs and nature of each state. The following features can be designed to connect the various programs across a state:

- Supportive governance structure
- Public–private partnerships
- Professional development
- Quality rating systems
- Early learning guidelines
- Pre-kindergarten funding
- Infant and toddler initiatives

#### ***Supportive Governance***

A comprehensive birth-to-5 system needs a sound governance structure that ensures that all the parts complement, rather than conflict with, each other. Such a structure must account for both *horizontal alignment* across systems that serve the same age children (e.g. child care, Head Start, state pre-kindergarten programs, and early intervention services) and *vertical alignment* to provide continuity and coordination for children as they participate in services

birth to age 5. Unified governance structures need not require co-location or merging of all agencies serving young children and their families, but they will always require cooperation, relationship building, coordinated planning, and shared vision among the early childhood education leadership in a state. For example, in 2004, Georgia created *Bright From the Start: The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning* (Bright From the Start, 2006). The new Georgia agency is headed by a commissioner who reports directly to the governor; it includes staff from the former pre-kindergarten office as well as child care division staff from the Department of Human Resources (DHR). DHR is the lead state agency for the federal child care subsidy funds, while Bright From the Start manages the state pre-kindergarten program, the federal child nutrition program, all child care center licensing and registering of family child care homes, and the quality and infant–toddler set-asides of the state’s portion of the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant. The new agency also houses the federally funded Head Start–State Collaboration Office.

### ***Public–Private Partnerships***

Public–private partnerships can help support planning, can engage a variety of stakeholders in support of early care and education, and can involve local community leaders and private funds in support of the birth to 5 system. Pioneer state initiatives include California’s First Five Commissions and North Carolina’s Smart Start. Both initiatives require local decision-making about how to allocate funds among activities designed to support early childhood development and education. Now additional states are tailoring this model to their own needs to engage local community support for early care and education.

### ***Professional Development***

The demand for highly qualified teachers across program auspices—child care, public schools, state pre-kindergarten, Head Start/Early Head Start—creates an opportune time to strengthen the professional development system for the early care and education workforce and improve services for children birth to 5 and beyond. Over the past decade, states have taken important steps to create a more integrated professional development system. Professional development plans have included expanding scholarship opportunities through Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) Early Childhood® Project, developing specific registries and/or state credentials for early childhood providers that link to the higher education system, developing articulation agreements between community colleges and 4-year institutions, and supplementing providers’ wages. Ideally, professional development opportunities include an emphasis on infant–toddler development and care specific to their needs.

### ***Quality Rating Systems***

Quality rating systems (QRS) provide states with a structure that can guide quality, accountability, and financing of early care and education and out-of-school time programs serving children birth to age 12. Policies that support QRS may be aligned with licensing standards and state or national program standards, such as accreditation. In some states, QRS are also linked to the child care subsidy system so that higher ratings of quality are tied to higher rates of payments. In Tennessee, the evaluation results of the QRS show improvements in child care quality, more children receiving higher quality care, parents have the information to make informed child care choices, caregivers have the information about what they are doing well and ways to improve. (University of Tennessee College of Social Work, Office of Research and Public Service, 2004)

### ***Early Learning Guidelines***

Early Learning Guidelines (ELGs) communicate information about what young children generally can be expected to know, understand, and be able to do, and often are linked to curriculum or activity guidelines for adults to use in supporting their development. ELGs can be applicable to the care and education of children in all settings. (National Infant & Toddler Child Care Initiative and National Child Care Information Center, 2005) All 50 states, Washington, D.C., and the U. S. territories are actively engaged in developing or implementing ELGs for 3- and 4-year-olds, and more than half of the states and territories are now developing or implementing ELGs for infants and toddlers.

### ***Pre-kindergarten Funding***

State pre-kindergarten programs have grown dramatically in the last two decades. In 1980, there were only 10 state programs (Gilliam & Zigler, 2004). Now, at least 38 states and the District of Columbia have one or more pre-kindergarten initiatives that serve preschool aged children, often limited to 4-year-olds (Barnett, Hustedt, Robin, & Schulman, 2005). By one estimate, these programs serve about 800,000 children, at a cost of over \$2.8 billion in state funds (Barnett et al., 2005).

State pre-kindergarten currently looks different in every state with respect to program and teacher standards, level of comprehensive services provided, and length of day and year (Gilliam & Marchesseault, 2005). State spending per enrolled child ranges widely from state to state (Barnett et al., 2005). Most pre-kindergarten children are served in public school settings, although 29 states allow private providers and Head Start programs to deliver pre-kindergarten as well (Schumacher, Ewen, Hart & Lombardi, 2004).

### **State Initiatives That Support Infants and Toddlers**

States are developing a range of policies and initiatives to address the needs of infants, toddlers, and their families. Three of these initiatives and programs—paid family leave, Early Head Start, and Infant Toddler Specialist Networks—are presented below.

#### ***Family and Parental Leave Policies***

Parents need time and support to be with their newborn babies. The *Family and Medical Leave Act*, enacted in 1993, has been an important step forward, however much more needs to be done to expand these benefits. Low-income working families in particular may be unable to benefit from family leave policies since they cannot afford to take unpaid leave, have jobs with the inflexible working conditions, and have a difficult time finding quality affordable infant care.

States can implement programs and policies that make it possible for new parents to provide and care for their new babies, including at-home infant care, flexible sick days, and paid parental leave. For example, “California law provides working parents up to 6 weeks of paid leave to care for a newborn, newly adopted child or foster care-placed child.” New parents in California can receive approximately 55% of their income for up to 6 weeks of family leave. (Grant, Hatcher, & Patel, 2005, p.18).

#### ***Early Head Start***

State strategies for using Early Head Start (EHS) to advance policy goals related to infant well-being, parent employment, and improved child care resources show great promise. For example, building onto the success of the federal Head Start program, in the late 90’s, Kansas took an important step forward by investing in the expansion of EHS. Through an innovative partnership between the state and federal governments, the Kansas Early Head

Start (KEHS) expansion project provides early, continuous, and intensive child development and family support services meeting federal Head Start Program Performance Standards to low-income pregnant women and families with infants and toddlers throughout the state. This project provides a model for other states seeking to expand services for at risk children birth to 3. (Lombardi & Bogle, 2004)

### ***Infant–Toddler Specialist Networks***

Infant–Toddler Specialist Networks are a relatively new and promising strategy that states and territories are using to improve the quality of child care and the healthy development of infants and toddlers. Infant–Toddler Specialists provide support to the infant–toddler field through a variety of approaches including coaching, mentoring and consultation, training, technical assistance, and other collaborative learning opportunities. Infant–Toddler Specialists support caregivers in all settings and serve as a resource to connect caregivers and programs to health, mental health, family support, and other services.

### **Beyond 5**

Concern for quality early childhood education does not end when children reach the schoolhouse door. In order to continue the gains made in the earliest years, children need to enter schools that have high-quality kindergarten through grade three classrooms. A new initiative led by the Foundation for Child Development is helping to promote pre-kindergarten-to-3 (PK-3) education reforms so that young children have access to quality early childhood services through the important early years of public education. (Foundation for Child Development, 2005).

### **The Possibilities and Challenges Ahead**

The convergence of the science of early childhood development with the momentum of school readiness efforts has created new opportunities for states and communities. State leaders are working to forge new governance structures, develop public–private partnerships, and create standards-based programs and services to meet the developmental needs of babies, toddlers, and preschool and elementary age children. As these efforts proceed, state leaders need to make special efforts to ensure that early childhood education promotes positive approaches to learning, is responsive to the cultural and linguistic needs of young children, and supports the social and emotional development so important to later success. Increased public investment in the early years is essential if we are to create a 21st century early education system. As states work to build an infrastructure for quality service delivery, they will need to assure equity for children of low-income and culturally diverse families and a set of services that fit the realities of working parents. With focused leadership, public will, and a vision of early childhood development that spans across the early years, we can move the agenda forward for children birth to 5 and beyond.

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