

ZERO TO THREE PRIORITIES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD IN THE REAUTHORIZATION OF THE ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION ACT



INTRODUCTION

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) presents an important opportunity to highlight the role of early childhood developmental experiences in preparing young children from birth to be confident and successful learners when they enter Kindergarten. The significance of these early years underscores the need to forge new connections, both conceptual and practical, between the worlds of early childhood care and education and the K-12 system.

While the connection to elementary school for preschool-aged children about to transition to Kindergarten is clear, the relationship of infants and toddlers to the elementary school years is more remote. Yet, no institution has a greater stake in what happens developmentally in the first three years of life than the K-12 education system. Deliberations about the overall direction of education policy should always include the knowledge that the first years of life are critically important to later success in school and adulthood. As stakeholders, education officials at all levels should support and advocate for investments in a system of high quality early care and learning that reaches children from their earliest years and flows in a continuum throughout the elementary school years and beyond. Such a system would ensure that the critical needs of vulnerable infants and toddlers—regardless of the setting in which they might be reached—are included in early childhood and K-12 planning. Furthermore, it would help parents, early childhood professionals, and teachers promote healthy development across all domains.

The reauthorization of ESEA thus represents a gateway for expanding our thinking about how best to support a birth to age eight *developmental* continuum. It calls for broad thinking about how schools can help support babies and toddlers within education policy, through the calculated consideration of methods to coordinate, collaborate, support, and invest in early learning efforts within their communities of learning.

ZERO TO THREE'S PRIORITIES ARE INFORMED BY BASIC PRINCIPLES ABOUT HOW VERY YOUNG CHILDREN DEVELOP AND LEARN

- Early experiences, coupled with the influence of genes, shape the architecture of the brain, forming the foundation—whether sturdy or fragile—for everything that follows.
- Early experiences take place in relationships. Without positive, nurturing relationships with parents and other caregivers (such as early childhood educators), interaction becomes more difficult and there are greater challenges in early learning experiences.
- Development is cumulative, so early experiences lay the foundation for all that follows. Because early experiences matter, we must intervene with young children who are at risk.
- Early experiences are a proven investment in our future. The cost-benefit research shows that for at-risk children—and the schools they will attend—playing catch-up later in life is expensive and inadequate.

ZERO TO THREE PRIORITIES

1. Continue the Use of Title I Funds to Serve Children Birth to Five

Under current law, Title I funds can be used to support early education services. While good data are not available, we do know that a small portion of funds are being used to fund early childhood programs, including a few for infants and toddlers.

ZERO TO THREE recommends that this use of funds be sustained and the flexibility of local districts to help promote early development be supported. We further recommend adding Early Head Start to the list of programs highlighted as possibilities for investment.

We particularly urge the Department of Education to help local school districts recognize their stake in positive developmental experiences for children during their earliest years. Many school districts may not be aware of the possibility of using Title I funds for early childhood services, particularly for infants and toddlers. Others may not understand the benefits of doing so or set aside too little funding to have a great enough impact. Education officials at the state and local level should be encouraged to invest Title I funds in early childhood education within the framework of the birth to five continuum. Investments could include: outreach to community providers to help fund quality improvements, expanding slots in Early Head Start programs, providing scholarships for low-income children in other high quality programs, or funding comprehensive home-based services to support early learning.

2. Require Data Collection on use of Title I Funds for Early Childhood Education

While Title I expenditures on high-quality programs for children from birth to age five have been allowable since the law's enactment in 1965, little is known about how these expenditures are used for young children, including infants and toddlers. Reports currently do not provide data on how many young children are being served, for what types of early childhood programs the funding is being used, and what services are being provided with the funds. The limited studies available have been unable to determine the extent to which Title I funds supported specific services, as local educational agencies may also layer Title I funds with other funding streams. Therefore, while we know that a few districts do use Title I for early childhood beginning at birth, data on the specifics of this funding stream is currently very limited.

ZERO TO THREE recommends that reauthorization language delineate specific data collection requirements on local educational agencies' use of Title I for early childhood disaggregated by age group (under age three and ages three and four), including:

- ❖ The number of children served by early childhood programs;
- ❖ A description of the program/setting funded through Title I; and
- ❖ A description of the services received, such as professional development or comprehensive services. This should include the program components and services supported through Title I funds as well as services supported through other funding sources.

3. Promote Joint Professional Development for Early Childhood and Early Elementary Educators

ZERO TO THREE recommends that the process of building a true birth through third grade continuum be strengthened by joint professional development between early childhood educators and early elementary school teachers and administrators. Such training could foster better understanding and alignment in areas such as curricula, classroom practices, supporting children with disabilities or who are English Language learners, and engaging families in supporting their children’s development and learning. For infants and toddlers, the most important aspect of such training would be an increased understanding on the part of elementary school principals and teachers of early childhood development about the importance of the earliest years in laying a strong foundation of brain development on which the scaffolding of later learning is built.

4. Incorporate Provisions within Literacy Initiatives Based on the Premise that Early Language and Literacy Begin at Birth

The Administration has taken steps to promote a comprehensive approach to supporting language and literacy starting from birth and continuing throughout a child’s school years. A similar literacy initiative was put forth by the Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation (LEARN) Act in the 111th Congress. ZERO TO THREE supports these efforts and the inclusion of infants and toddlers in this comprehensive approach.

The early foundations of language and literacy begin at birth and continue to develop during the years that follow, long before any formal instruction. This foundation for future learning is being laid at the emotional, cognitive, experiential and even cellular levels. Right from birth, infants are driven to communicate and are skilled at doing so. During infancy, brain development is occurring at a faster pace than at any other time in a human being’s development. The networks within the infant’s brain are transformed into an increasing complex web of visual, motor, language, and social-emotional connections that are essential for later literacy learning.

For young children, literacy, language, and culture are interrelated. The development of strong attachment relationships with family and primary caregivers is a central task of infancy. It is in the context of warm, loving relationships that infants learn to trust, to feel safe exploring their world, and to develop a sense of competence and confidence in their own ability to master new skills. This growing sense of self-esteem and personal identity prepares them for later success as communication partners, readers, and writers.

It is not only in the context of the family that early development and learning unfolds and is influenced. Quality early care and education promotes cognitive, language, and social and emotional development. One feature that distinguishes high quality care is the amount and quality of language stimulation provided. Such child care—where providers are both supportive and offer more and richer verbal stimulation—creates an environment where children are likely to show advanced cognitive and language development.

ZERO TO THREE recommends that literacy initiatives within ESEA explicitly recognize that language acquisition and the foundations of literacy begin in the earliest years. They should:

- ❖ **Ensure that significant funding is devoted to strengthening language and literacy services for children birth to three.** The Administration’s current literacy initiative

under Striving Readers requires states receiving grants to use 15 percent of funds for early childhood programs serving children birth to five. We support this level of set-aside, but strongly recommend that at least a third of funds within that amount be dedicated to infant-toddler initiatives. Infant-toddler programs, where the connection to literacy through building communication skills may not be as obvious as working with older children on their reading skills, are easily overlooked and may receive less emphasis when funds are awarded. Yet, the foundation on which these later efforts build is being laid during that early period.

- ❖ **Include language appropriate to very young children and their families**, for example, by:
 - Promoting *language* as well as literacy rich environments;
 - Including *early childhood programs, educators, and administrators* as well as school principals and teachers;
 - Emphasizing *family engagement* to recognize not only the role of parents in emergent literacy, but also the importance of reaching all at-risk infants and toddlers regardless of setting; and
 - Recognizing that programs focusing on the birth-to-three/five population should address *early development* as well as early learning. A sole focus on “learning” implies attention only on the cognitive domain, whereas early childhood programs should promote appropriate development in all domains (cognitive, social, emotional, and physical). These domains are inextricably related and are all necessary for later learning in school.
- ❖ **Focus adequate attention on professional development for early childhood educators**, including non-classroom based providers, so they have the understanding and training they need to support the early learning processes and implement evidence-based approaches.
- ❖ **Dedicate funds to increase the amount of research** available on how to best support, through parent education and professional development for educators, early development and learning especially as it relates to language and literacy.

5. Require K-12 and Community-Based Early Care and Education Providers to Support and Coordinate Efforts with Each Other

An important step to forging a continuum of early learning from birth through third grade is coordination between schools and the largely community-based settings in which young children receive their early development and learning experiences. For the most part, such coordination would involve early childhood programs focused on the years immediately preceding Kindergarten entry. However, encouraging schools to reach out to programs serving younger children would help foster a greater understanding of the roles and contributions of these programs to the foundations for later learning.

ZERO TO THREE recommends strengthening the language in Section 1120B of ESEA related to transition so that school districts must collaborate with a broader range of early childhood programs than just Head Start and Even Start, as now required. In addition, this section should include language to create a reciprocal requirement to the provision in the 2007 reauthorization of Head Start in Section 642A of the Head Start Act requiring coordination and open communication between Head Start and schools, including formal procedures for facilitating transitions. Inserting parallel language in ESEA will ensure that the coordination and

collaboration efforts are bi-directional and support a seamless transition between early learning and K-12.

CONCLUSION

ZERO TO THREE encourages the promotion of a continuum of learning and educational supports based on the premise that learning begins at birth and thus forms a foundation on which future development and learning are built. Increased collaboration with and investment in community-based early childhood programs and structures by school systems would be a welcome contribution, if built on the knowledge of how learning unfolds for very young children. Yet we also recognize that, given the pressures on schools to meet immediate academic achievement goals, the prospects of significant increases in funding for early childhood through education sources such as Title I are modest. Therefore, we believe the Administration and Congress must continue to press forward on significantly expanding proven programs such as Early Head Start, high-quality child care, and comprehensive home-based services as the mainstays of early development and learning for our nation's youngest children.