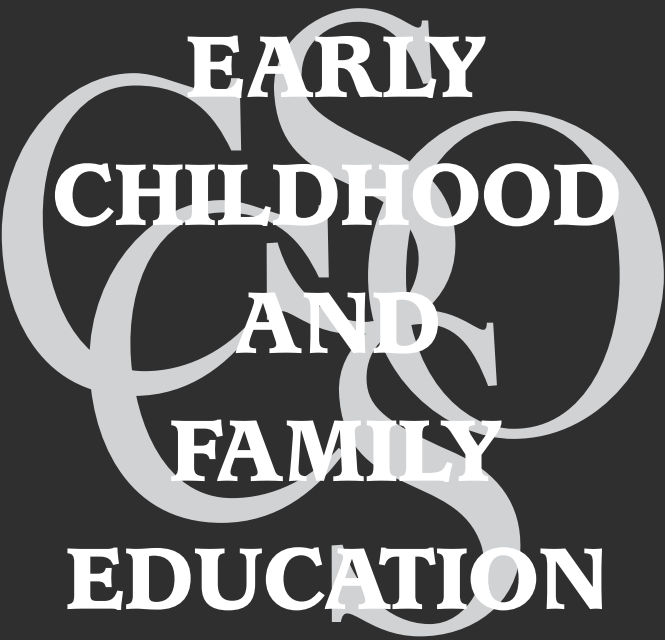


THE COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS



**EARLY
CHILDHOOD
AND
FAMILY
EDUCATION**

COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS (CCSSO)

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a nationwide, nonprofit organization composed of the public officials—appointed and elected—who lead departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, and five extra-state jurisdictions.

CCSSO organizes its members' consensus on major educational issues and expresses their positions to civic and professional organizations, federal agencies, Congress, and the public. The members' consensus in federal legislation is presented in this publication.

CCSSO is a partner in several coalitions with major education, business, and service organizations dedicated to improving elementary and secondary education for America's students.

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Council of Chief State School Officers 1999

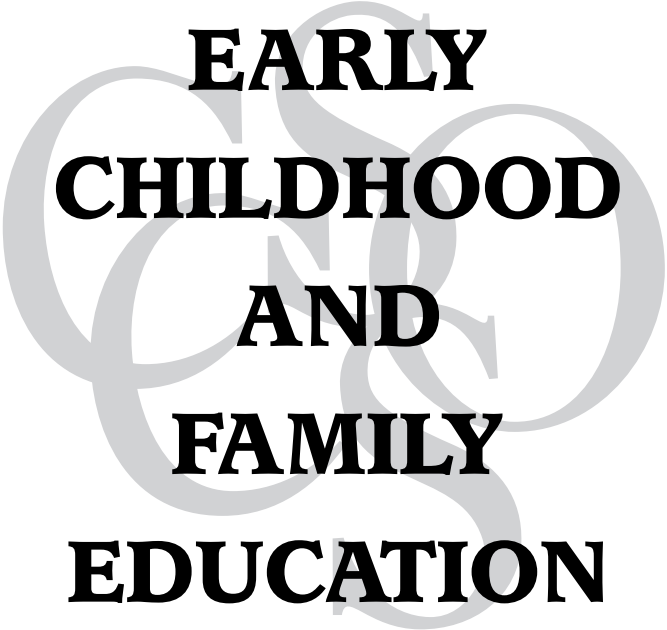
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**EARLY
CHILDHOOD
AND
FAMILY
EDUCATION**

New Realities,
New Opportunities
A Council Policy Statement

ADOPTED NOVEMBER 1999

More than a decade has passed since 1988 when the Council of Chief State School Officers issued a policy statement on early childhood care and education. Many, if not most, of the priorities identified in that statement continue to have relevance today. However, over the course of the decade the context has changed significantly. Demographic and social changes have altered the terrain, requiring different approaches and emphases. Studies of other nations demonstrate that our major trading partners' efforts in early childhood education far exceed the opportunities provided in the United States.

Years of research and practice have expanded our understanding of early development and learning. Public awareness of the importance of early experience has increased, and knowledge about the impact of parent and family actions, and government and private agency programs on children require new commitments.

The Council, is therefore, restating its policy with new imperatives for early childhood education to reflect these new realities, understandings, and opportunities.

EARLY CHILDHOOD AND FAMILY EDUCATION

■ A CALL TO ACTION

Our statement of commitment as educators addresses our colleagues who teach and care for children; policy makers in localities, states, and the nation; those who provide caring services; leaders of community, business, and labor; and parents and families.

We invite all to come together at this extraordinary juncture to rethink our assumptions about how and when children learn and to renew our priorities and strategies. We must expand our efforts to see that every child receives the care and education, the skills and knowledge, needed to thrive in a fast-changing world, and to ensure that every family has the information, understanding, and support needed to give their children the best possible start in life.

We are committed to:

- ◆ Promote parent and family education and join in coordinated health, child care and education services which enable families to provide creative development for their infants and toddlers;
- ◆ Ensure that every child has the opportunity for high quality, universal early care and education at age 3 and 4 through either public or private schools and agencies with funding through public and/or private sources, depending on need;
- ◆ Assure the continuity of education experiences as children move through early childhood programs and into elementary school, particularly in terms of pre-literacy preparation;
- ◆ Strengthen early childhood program standards and accountability and improve assessment of child development and readiness; and
- ◆ Expand and disseminate new knowledge about how to improve early childhood education.

■ NEW REALITIES

We call for a more systematic, comprehensive approach to early childhood learning that reflects new realities which confront our society as we cross into the new millennium, and new opportunities stemming from new insights into early childhood learning and greater public awareness of the importance of the early years.

Many of the broad changes that have taken place in American society over the last decade affect children from their early years. Today, 62 % of preschool-age children have working parents. The great majority of children (about 70 %) receive some or most of their care outside of their homes by the time they are three years old. Welfare reforms are requiring parents to enter the workforce and, therefore, increasing the need for preschool programs among low-income families. However, most working families cannot find or afford high-quality care for their young children. Nearly 86 % of the settings where young children, particularly those of less affluent families, spend their days have been found to be of “poor” to “mediocre” quality. Infants and toddlers are more likely than preschoolers to receive care in inadequate settings. The 1995 Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Study reported that only 8 % of infant classrooms—compared to 24 % of preschool classrooms—were of “good” or “excellent” quality. Staffing problems undermine the quality of early childhood programs—with staff turnover ranging from 25 % to 50 % annually. Finding and retaining qualified individuals to staff early childhood programs is becoming an urgent challenge in many states. Addressing compensation and career development for providers is imperative.

We are very concerned about these findings, especially in view of the fact that meeting the needs of America’s children is a more complex task than ever before. In the realm of education, diversity is not a slogan; it is a reality. By the year 2030, the majority of America’s children will be from groups now thought of as “minorities.” Moreover, many families continue to face tough odds as they raise their children. The percentage of children living in poverty remains very high, more than one of every five children, despite the robust economy of the nineties in one of the wealthiest nations ever. In addition, many children have

working parents who hold low-wage jobs and are hard pressed to make ends meet.

■ **NEW OPPORTUNITIES**

Over the last decade, education—including the care and education of young children—has been lifted by the public and government policy makers to the top of the nation’s agenda. In part, this surge of interest in children’s issues reflects evidence, emanating from such fields as neuroscience, cognitive science, and child development, that learning is truly life-long, stretching from the first days of life to the last; that continual learning is essential to keep up with technological changes; and that the nation’s future is dependent on the knowledge and capacity of its citizens.

Research now confirms what parents and teachers have long observed — that early learning creates a foundation for later achievement, and that efforts to help children develop to their fullest cannot be postponed until they reach the age of five or six. Moreover, efforts to reform and strengthen K-12 education cannot succeed without a concerted effort to support the people and improve the programs entrusted with the care and education of our youngest children.

Researchers and practitioners in the field of early childhood education have made long strides in recent years. We know much more about how children learn and the kinds of programs and practices that promote healthy development and learning. The components of quality in early care and education have been researched and elaborated. We know more about how to promote literacy and prevent reading problems. In the primary grades, we have well-tested programs that help children get off to a good start in school. All of these advances present us with new opportunities.

■ **UNWAVERING CONVICTIONS**

The Chief State School Officers remain determined to see that every child has the opportunity to develop to his or her fullest potential. We remain convinced that our society must strengthen its commitment to the well-being of all children and their families, and must be willing to alter

its institutions and services to address the new realities that shape their lives. These are the commitments set forth in our 1988 Policy Statement, and they remain bedrock beliefs.

But we have learned, over the last decade, that merely changing institutions and services will not take us far enough. A patchwork of programs—even new or improved programs—is not sufficient. We need, within each state, a common understanding of what it will take to help all children and all families thrive and a shared plan for getting there.

Over the last two decades, we have resolutely established new standards for learning and strategies to provide education that prepares all our children for world-class achievement levels—the highest in our history. As we act to overcome underachievement and inequity, we have many tools at our disposal, including a large body of research, an array of best practices, and powerful strategies for school improvement and system reform. But in the realm of early childhood education, a wide gap remains between what we know and what we do. Our work is especially challenging.

■ **WE BEGIN WITH THE CHILDREN**

Their needs are great, and they are counting on the adults in their lives—at home, in early childhood programs, at school, or in their neighborhoods

. **TO PROTECT THEM.** They are counting on us to ensure their safety and health—to prevent injury and illness, to act quickly when problems arise, and to ensure that no child falls through the cracks because of their parents' lack of means or their communities' lack of resources.

. **TO CHERISH THEM.** To thrive, children need at least one adult who cares deeply about them—a loving parent, grandparent, or other concerned adult. In addition, they need secure, warm relationships with the adults who are responsible for them in other settings, or when parents are unavailable. Research on resilience shows that strong relationships with caring adults, whether at home or in their communities, can help children to thrive despite difficult circumstances.

. **TO UNDERSTAND THEM.** Children need love . . . but love by itself may not be enough. They also need adults to understand their developmental needs at various stages of growth. Children fare better when the adults who care for them have the information, tools, resources, and social networks needed to do a good job. They fare better when educational programs and other organizations have a realistic grasp of their families' lives and schedules and design services accordingly.

. **TO GUIDE THEM.** Families raise children in different ways—imbuing them with different beliefs and values. But other institutions play a role in guiding children, setting and conveying expectations for their behavior and learning, and transmitting shared values of our society, such as compassion, service to others, success through effort, tolerance, and responsibility for one's actions. Children thrive when all of the adults they encounter reinforce these basic messages and set consistent, clear and high expectations.

. **TO TEACH THEM.** Children need parents and all of the other teachers in their lives to help them value learning and to engage in activities which advance their cognitive capacity and knowledge about themselves, their culture, and their environment.

All young children have these needs. Of course, at different stages, these needs may take different forms:

In the first years of life (0-3), early activities to promote creative development and to prevent negative impacts are especially important. Ensuring a good start in life means providing prenatal care, well-baby care, good nutrition, health screenings, stimulating learning, and early intervention when problems arise. Employment practices that give parents the option of caring for their own newborns should be encouraged (and modeled by state school officers whenever possible). Parent education and family support programs help parents in their roles as children's first teachers, and provide crucial information about the kind of learning activities and care children need both at home and in child care settings. Monitoring and improving the quality of infant and toddler programs is an especially urgent priority, given evidence that these programs tend to be of poor quality. Health and safety are of the

utmost importance, but we must be particularly concerned about the kinds of learning activities and language experiences available to young children whether at home or in other settings. All caregivers need reasonable working conditions and access to information and support, including relatives or family child care providers.

In their preschool years (3-5), the developmental activities of the earlier years must be reinforced. At this stage, children continue to have strong health and safety needs combined with the imperative for creative learning experiences. Many more are in center-based care or pre-kindergarten programs. School readiness becomes a more pressing issue. While certain children with disabilities are eligible for public education services, most other children are not.

We believe that during this age span, all families should have the option of enrolling their children in high quality preschool programs. Affluent families are able to provide such opportunities. Less affluent families cannot afford them. If our nation is to have a “universal” opportunity for high quality preschool, we must assure that the burden of paying for such programs is not borne entirely by parents and that public support enables access to programs for families of varying economic standing. Such programs must have strong family engagement components, and offer lively, varied learning activities that inspire children’s curiosity and creativity while meeting their developmental strengths and needs and responding to their families’ cultural backgrounds and preferences.

Children need our best efforts to monitor and assure quality. Program staff should be well qualified and highly motivated. Teaching and learning should be rooted in research-based best practices. Program facilities must be safe and promote healthy development. In particular, we need to bring to bear new insights into early literacy, profiting from research pointing to the kinds of early experiences that foster literacy and prevent reading difficulties, both at home and in early care and education settings. Helping all children learn to communicate effectively is essential for their readiness for school and their capacity for further learning.

In the primary grade years (5-8), children need schools that are ready for them — that is, ready to meet individual

boys and girls wherever they happen to be on the developmental spectrum; to provide continuity with early learning experiences; to involve families; and to ensure that children do not slip into the gap that often opens up between the culture of the home and the culture of the school. Schools need to ensure that research on learning in the primary grades is infused into early childhood curricula, teacher education programs, and staff development strategies. School-aged children with working parents—the majority in today’s world (approximately 76%)—need extended-day and extended-year programs to engage them in interesting activities and keep them safe while their mothers and fathers work.

During the first eight years, continuity of child care and educational services is critical to sustain the initial positive effects of parent and family. This is particularly important with regard to pre-literacy and literacy development. Children who receive consistent services as they move across institutional structures perform better on academic and social development measures well into the elementary, middle, and secondary grades.

■ THE IMPERATIVE

Meeting this broad range of needs requires a comprehensive strategy in each state. The goal is to create an early childhood “system” — an integrated, collaborative effort by many institutions (including families, child care programs, health care professionals, schools, institutions of higher education, employers, faith institutions, community organizations, and governments) to serve the full range of children’s needs. Some have called it “a conspiracy of caring” — where everywhere children turn, they meet efforts dedicated to their healthy development and learning.

Virtually every state in the union now has some kinds of early childhood initiatives — some more far-reaching than others. However, no state has yet created the kind of seamless early childhood system with opportunities for all children and families, if they choose to take them, envisioned in this statement. Such a system will not happen by chance. It necessitates brainstorming, planning, ongoing advocacy efforts, and sustained collaboration. It calls for a willingness to rethink longstanding finance and

governance structures. It requires our best efforts both to create high quality programs, and also to strengthen accountability and deepen our knowledge about early childhood learning. Many of the responsibilities and actions lie beyond the roles and authority of chief state school officers. No one group will have comprehensive or full responsibility. Nevertheless, we are committed to participating actively in collaborative efforts, dedicating resources to them, and playing a leading role in moving our states toward creation and realization of comprehensive early childhood strategies.

■ STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

I

Assuring Every Child the Best Possible Start in Life By Creating a Comprehensive System for Early Care and Learning in Every State

In the field of early childhood care and education, solutions abound. In states and localities across the nation, good ideas for improving and expanding early care and education services are being put to the test. But most states lack a coherent strategy for ensuring that every family has good health and child care options. Experts on early childhood learning agree that piecemeal solutions cannot solve the quality problem. What states need most urgently is a comprehensive vision of the kinds of services its young children need, and a workable plan for realizing it. State governments can help to set in motion processes by which residents can come together to develop a plan for meeting the most urgent needs of young children and their families. As states urge local comprehensive developments, they must themselves model effective state agency collaboration by aligning data systems, financing, and program requirements.

These plans require attention not only to programs, but also to the behind-the-scenes issues that most states and communities are just beginning to address. Key elements of a comprehensive vision include:

Public engagement: Recent experience in states that have launched significant pre-kindergarten initiatives shows that arguments for universal pre-kindergarten can hold

sway in the political arena, but this requires a sustained and powerful public engagement effort.

Finance: New finance models are essential to improving quality. Today, early childhood programs in our country are severely underfunded. Most of the costs are borne by parents with young children, who tend to be in the early stages of their careers. To stay competitive, programs charge fees that are well below the real costs of high-quality services; subsidies are generally tied to market rates and perpetuate poor quality. New strategies are needed to increase public investment in early childhood education and to assure accountability and equity in their use.

Governance and coordination: In coming years, system-building efforts will require urgent attention. The overall governance of public funds must remain under the direction of the appropriate state and local agencies. However, a mixed delivery system, including public and private schools and other agencies, is the most realistic approach to getting large scale pre-kindergarten programs up and running in a timely way, meeting parents' diverse needs and preferences, and overcoming resistance by existing providers. Local boards of education will need to form or strengthen working relationships with other early childhood education providers and community organizations. Intensive, ongoing collaboration is required, and this takes time and resources.

II

Assuring High-Quality Early Learning for All Children

In 1988, our Council broke new ground by calling for universal access to high-quality early care and education programs for four-year-olds. In an era of severe cuts in social programs, we recommended concentrating public resources on children at risk.

Today's realities demand an even stronger commitment. We are calling for high-quality early care and education for all three- and four-year-olds whose parents want to enroll them. Nothing less will suffice at a time when most children have no parent at home during the day. Nothing less will ensure that every child has the chance to get a good start in school.

Today, most young children receive most or all of their care during working hours outside of the home. Indeed, most states now require former welfare recipients, including mothers with preschool-age children, to spend their days away from home. Making early care and education more accessible and affordable is therefore an urgent need. But expanding the supply is not sufficient. The quality of early care and education is a crucial factor, and has been shown to affect school readiness. In particular, high-quality early care and education programs can help to foster the literacy skills that are so crucial to school achievement.

Of course, wonderful programs and providers can be found in most communities. But today, they are the exception, not the rule. Researchers have judged the quality of most center-based programs—86 percent—to be mediocre to poor. The quality of care in family child care homes—where providers take in children while their parents work—also tends to be inadequate.

Key components of high-quality programs include:

- ◆ ***Family engagement:*** Early childhood programs need strong, ongoing partnerships with families so that they can address their preferences and needs and strengthen the connection between home and school. Parents also need help from schools and other authorities in being effective advocates and consumers of services for their children.
- ◆ ***Parent preparation:*** Each generation of secondary students is also a generation of future parents. The nature of their education shapes their disposition toward the way they will eventually raise and teach their own children. The quality of their overall education and the introduction they are given to their opportunities and responsibilities for their own children's learning are of great significance. The schools have a major potential in helping prepare students for successful future roles in early childhood and family education.
- ◆ ***Community involvement:*** Stronger linkages of programs to community agencies and organizations are crucial. In particular, there is an urgent need to link health services to educational services. An important aspect of community involvement

is creating more family-friendly workplaces. To assist local school districts and community organizations in strengthening collaboration, state agencies must act together to promote cooperative services and to help build greater capacity to provide comprehensive services to young children and their families.

- ◆ ***Teacher preparation and continued professional development:*** The preparation and development of early childhood educators is woefully inadequate. For instance, the norm in early childhood professional development is three to six hours of training annually. The teacher reform movement has tried to raise teaching and learning results by focusing on the preparation, induction, and ongoing professional development of teachers. It seeks to upgrade the quality of teaching and learning by setting and enforcing higher standards for teachers. Providers of early care and education need to be held to high standards; at the same time, they need to have opportunities and incentives—both economic and professional—to stay in the field and to enhance their knowledge and skills.
- ◆ ***Program licensing:*** Today, half of all pre-kindergarten programs are legally exempt from any kind of quality standards. States must review and make more rigorous their licensing strategy for programs and for early childhood educators and other professionals.

III

Strengthening Early Childhood Program Standards and Accountability and Improving Evaluation of Child Development and Readiness

Public investment in the early years is a powerful strategy for raising school achievement. Based on more than a decade of research and practice, the Council believes that money spent up front, in high-quality early childhood programs tied to effective, well-targeted support services, will yield significant returns. However, if taxpayers are to increase and sustain support for early childhood programs, accountability is a top priority.

By strengthening accountability, early childhood programs will be aligned with today's most promising school

reform efforts. A relentless focus on students and results sets today's school change efforts apart from previous waves of reform. However, finding the best way to gauge results is not easy. Parents, child advocates, and educators alike have questioned the appropriateness of readiness tests for young children, and expressed concern about the misuse of assessments to label or categorize children.

Judgments by parents, providers and public officials on individual program and project effectiveness and on the progress of individual children are, of course, being made continually. The problems of accountability center on the validity of large-scale evaluations and the selection of indicators and techniques of measurement.

Recently, researchers have made strides toward defining the kinds of skills or developmental milestones that should be measured in the early years, determining how to assess them appropriately, and reaching consensus on how to use this information to improve services and strengthen accountability.

To move forward on the issue of accountability, educators in consultation with families and policy makers must diligently search for answers to these questions.

- ◆ ***What have we learned from existing pre-kindergarten programs?*** Rigorous evaluations of existing, large-scale pre-kindergarten programs are vital. In addition to data on program results, we need to know which public engagement strategies are effective or have worked; which finance and governance strategies are most promising; how parents have been engaged; how the transition from pre-K to elementary school is best attained; and how different sectors and organizations have contributed to (or undermined) success. Results from current practices must be effectively summarized and available for policy and decision makers.
- ◆ ***What more can we learn about the impact of high-quality early childhood programs?*** In particular, how does participation in a high-quality early childhood education program affect later reading achievement? Which approaches to early childhood education yield the greatest benefits? How can children with special needs or circumstances be served most effectively? Continued research on the long-term benefits

of early childhood education is crucial to advocacy, implementation, and program improvement efforts.

- ◆ ***What kinds of assessments are appropriate for programs serving young children, and how can they be used to benefit children*** by providing valuable information on program effectiveness and accountability?
- ◆ ***How do staff qualifications relate to program effectiveness?*** How do the qualifications, training, and working conditions of the teaching staff influence program effectiveness?

In order to assist the states with information and support activities that can strengthen their knowledge base on the use of assessments at the early childhood level, the Council will take the following actions:

- ◆ Conduct a survey of the states to determine current activities in the areas of early childhood assessment or evaluation, and their interest in working together in a collaborative group or consortium to address crucial issues; and
- ◆ Depending on responses to the survey, convene a special group such as a State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards (SCASS) that will focus on issues related to the assessment and evaluation of young children and early childhood education programs.

IV

Expanding Knowledge and Improving Practice in the Realm of Early Childhood Education

Rarely in the history of our nation have elementary and secondary educators had such exciting opportunities to strengthen early childhood learning and, thereby, improve later achievement. Parents, families and the public appear to be more inclined than ever before to invest in the early years. Elementary and secondary schools are working much more collaboratively with early childhood program providers to meet the full range of children's needs.

Things are happening quickly in the field of early childhood learning. The challenges are clear, and while it is

difficult to predict how states will meet them, we can be sure that programs and services will proliferate in coming years. Quality and access by all families remain the big question marks. To ensure that programs and services are as appropriate and effective as possible, we need to support more research. We encourage institutions of higher education and other research centers to focus a research agenda on early childhood learning and practice and disseminate findings in clear language. In particular, we need to know more about the kinds of settings and curricula that benefit children in the early years, the kinds of preparation and staffing patterns that enhance quality, and the kinds of parent and community participation that promote learning. We need to know more about effective, equitable assessment practices. We need to know more about alternative, effective strategies for financing, governing, and monitoring early childhood programs.

To ensure that the research agenda has high yield, we need to be certain that researchers' assumptions and projects are grounded in the realities of today's early childhood programs and classrooms, and that professionals who work with children every day are involved in and benefit from the studies.

■ CONCLUSION

An astute observer of our nation's schools once wrote, Americans "invest in education with all kinds of millennial hopes and expectations." Now, at the threshold of the new millennium, those hopes and expectations are immense.

Today, across the nation, there is greater recognition that the early years present invaluable opportunities to enhance later learning, and greater determination to seize those opportunities. We believe that the strategies outlined in this document will enable us to narrow the gap between what we know and what we do.

Chief state school officers stand ready, state by state and nationwide, to join with families, colleagues, policy makers, and the public to implement these strategies. As public servants, we must always answer to the public. As educators, we must answer to the children. We owe it to them to do everything possible to realize their promise and the promise of the nation they will inherit.

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