

10 New Ideas for Early Education in the NCLB Reauthorization

By Sara Mead*

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) seeks to improve student learning and narrow academic achievement gaps that place low-income and minority students at a disadvantage relative to their affluent and white peers. The law's best-known provisions require states to test children annually in grades three through eight, and build systems of accountability and intervention in low-performing schools based on those assessments.

Yet evidence shows that the roots of children's academic success or failure are already firmly in place by third grade,¹ and as much as half of the black-white achievement gap already exists before children enter first grade.² To meet the goals of narrowing achievement gaps and bringing all students to proficiency, NCLB must do a much better job of catalyzing and supporting state and local efforts to improve children's education in the preschool and early elementary years—long before children take their first NCLB-mandated state assessment.

The good news is that NCLB already contains several programs and provisions to improve early education. The federal Title I program, NCLB's largest program, provided \$12.8 billion in 2007 to improve education for disadvantaged youngsters. School districts may use Title I funds not only for K-12 programs, but also to provide preschool programs to at-risk children from birth through school entry. Between two and three percent of Title I funds are used for this purpose.³

Several other provisions in Title I also affect early education, such as requirements that school districts work with pre-kindergarten (pre-k) and Head Start programs to plan children's transition to kindergarten. NCLB also authorizes three additional programs—Early Reading First, Even Start, and the Early Childhood Educator Professional Development program—that specifically focus on pre-k education. All told, these four federal programs provide nearly half a billion dollars annually for pre-k.⁴

10 NEW IDEAS FOR EARLY EDUCATION IN THE NCLB REAUTHORIZATION

- 1) Allow Reading First funds to be used for pre-k language and literacy activities
- 2) Tap supplemental educational services and public school choice set-aside funds for high-quality pre-k
- 3) Improve accountability for early education programs
- 4) Restructure elementary schools identified for reconstitution as PK-3 Early Education Academies
- 5) Strengthen the ability of charter schools to deliver high-quality pre-k
- 6) Combine NCLB's Title V block grant program with Head Start's newly authorized state early childhood coordination initiative to create a single "2020 Early Education" state grant program
- 7) Require pre-k programs operated in public schools or with Title I funds to employ "highly qualified early educators" as lead teachers
- 8) Create a "Pathways to Pre-kindergarten Teaching" alternative certification demonstration program
- 9) Provide targeted professional development to individual teachers
- 10) Expand the representation of English Language Learners in pre-k programs

*Sara Mead is a Senior Research Fellow at the Education Policy Program of the New America Foundation. This report was funded through a generous grant from the Foundation for Child Development.

NCLB programs also focus significant resources on early education in grades one through three: The Reading First program, funded at more than a billion dollars annually, supports scientifically-based literacy instruction from kindergarten through third grade. Districts also use Title I resources to improve early elementary school classrooms.

But despite the importance of the pre-k and early elementary school years, and NCLB's inclusion of programs focused on them, the current debate over NCLB reauthorization has devoted very little attention to improving pre-k and early elementary school programs, separately or as an integrated collective. The main debate has been over the law's testing and accountability provisions—which focus on student performance in grades three through eight. To be sure, advocates for universal pre-k are lobbying for the creation of a new pre-k title in NCLB, which would be accompanied by substantial new federal funding to support state universal pre-k efforts. Senators Hillary Clinton (D-NY) and Kit Bond (R-MO), Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA), Rep. Susan Davis (D-CA-53), and Rep. Mazie Hirono (D-HI-2) have all introduced legislation to this effect.

But there is almost no discussion of how provisions already in NCLB could better support high-quality early education in pre-k through grade three (PK-3). The draft NCLB legislation put forward by the House Education and Labor Committee staff earlier this fall included a number of provisions to address the needs of high schools, but proposed almost no changes to NCLB's early education programs or the provisions that affect them. And there are many provisions in NCLB—beyond the programs that specifically focus on preschool-aged-children—that affect or have the potential to affect early education. Two-thirds of children in rapidly growing state pre-k programs attend classes in public schools, so policies that affect elementary schools also affect pre-k.⁵ Provisions throughout NCLB—from its teacher quality provisions to its charter school program—should be updated to reflect the increased inclusion of pre-k in public education, and to acknowledge the centrality of high-quality early education to achieving the law's school improvement goals.

This issue brief offers 10 ways the next iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the law NCLB reauthorized in 2001, can better support high-quality early education. These ideas address issues from accountability, to teacher quality, to school improvement and corrective action, to charter schools, as they relate to early education. They are all ideas with little or no cost to the federal government, relying on better use of existing funds rather than new funding. These are not the only ways to improve early education in NCLB. Programs for

technology, Indian education, and Even Start, among others, could also be altered to better support early education. But these ideas form a starting point for a broader discussion about how NCLB can better support high-quality early education.

1) Allow Reading First funds to be used for pre-k language and literacy activities

Reading First provides more than \$1 billion annually to states and school districts to support scientifically-based early literacy instruction. In contrast to NCLB's Title I program, current law and regulations allow Reading First funds only to be used in kindergarten through third grade, and not in pre-k programs.⁶ This policy prevents school districts that operate pre-k programs from using Reading First to support a comprehensive early literacy strategy from pre-k through grade three (PK-3), undermines school districts' efforts to use Title I to provide high-quality pre-k, and prevents Reading First from leveraging quality improvements in the two-thirds of state pre-k classrooms operated by local school districts.⁷ The Early Reading First program provides funds for pre-k literacy programs, but it is a much smaller, competitive grant program that serves relatively few students. Allowing school districts to use Reading First in pre-k programs will improve the quality of pre-k literacy programs and alignment between pre-k and later grades.

2) Tap supplemental educational services and public school choice set-aside funds for high-quality pre-k

NCLB requires school districts to make available up to 20 percent of their Title I allocation to provide public school choice and supplemental educational services (SES) for children in schools identified for school improvement under the law. But only a fraction of eligible students take advantage of these options, and as a result, many districts spend less than 20 percent of their Title I allocation on these programs.⁸ Congress should amend Section 1116 of the law to require all school districts with schools identified for improvement to devote the full 20 percent of their Title I allocation to public school choice, supplemental services, and a third option: high-quality pre-k for 3- and 4-year-olds living in communities with schools in need of improvement. High-quality pre-k programs: (i) employ qualified lead teachers with a bachelor's degree and specialized knowledge of how young children learn, (ii) have small class sizes of 20 students or less, with one adult for each 10 children, and (iii) use clearly articulated curricula that develop children's cognitive, language, literacy and social-emotional skills and are research-based and aligned with early elementary curriculum. Districts that do not spend 20 percent of their Title I allocation on choice and SES

would be required to transfer that money to high-quality pre-k programs. This policy would increase funding available for high-quality pre-k programs, target that funding to children at risk of later school failure, and counter concerns that NCLB's requirements will reduce Title I funds available for pre-k.⁹ It would also reduce incentives for school districts create barriers that prevent parents from exercising choice and SES options, because districts would have to spend the full 20 percent regardless of how many parents requested choice and SES.

3) Improve accountability for early education programs

The reauthorized NCLB will allow states to use growth models to determine whether schools are making adequate yearly progress (AYP). To do so, states must establish longitudinal student data systems that track individual students' performance over time. These systems provide an opportunity for states to evaluate the long-term impact of pre-kindergarten investments—but only if data systems include information about children's pre-k experiences. NCLB reauthorization should require state longitudinal student data systems developed under the law to include information about: (i) whether children attended pre-kindergarten or Head Start, (ii) the specific provider utilized, (iii) the qualifications of the child's pre-k teacher, (iv) the type of curriculum used and whether it is aligned with public elementary school curricula in the relevant school district, and (v) the results of screenings or developmentally appropriate assessments administered by the provider. The same individual student identifier should follow children from pre-k through K-12 schooling. Including early education data in student longitudinal data systems will allow policymakers to focus on whether pre-k programs are having positive long-term impacts on children—not on test scores for toddlers.

4) Restructure elementary schools identified for reconstitution as PK-3 Early Education Academies

NCLB Section 1116 requires schools that fail to make AYP for five years to develop a "reconstitution" plan. The law offers a menu of reconstitution options, such as closing the school and reopening it as a charter school. NCLB should offer elementary schools identified for reconstitution the option and funding to reconstitute themselves as PK-3 Early Education Academies.¹⁰ PK-3 Early

Education Academies must: (i) serve children ages 3-8; (ii) offer pre-kindergarten and full-day kindergarten; (iii) deliver a vertically-aligned curriculum emphasizing literacy, language, and social-emotional development in the context of a full complement of core academic subjects; and (iv) provide time for teachers to work together in age and disciplinary teams to align curriculum and instruction from pre-kindergarten through grade three. PK-3 Early Education Academies could be either neighborhood schools or schools of choice. Grades four and up could be reconstituted as a separate school-within-a-school, or students in those grades could receive priority for transfer to higher-performing public schools. Reconstituting chronically low-performing elementary schools as PK-3 Early Education Academies provides a compelling whole-school reform vision, focuses policy on ensuring children get a firm educational foundation by the end of third grade, and increases early learning time to help meet this goal.

5) Strengthen the ability of charter schools to deliver high-quality pre-k

A growing number of charter schools across the country offer high-quality pre-k and PK-3 early education programs. But state and federal laws often create unnecessary obstacles for charter schools that want to operate high-quality pre-k programs. Congress should alter the federal charter schools program to better support charter schools that want to offer pre-k and to create incentives for states to change laws that block charter schools from offering pre-k. First, alter the definition of a charter school in section 5210 to include charter schools that offer pre-kindergarten. This would clarify pre-k charter school programs' eligibility for federal charter school grants. Second, add a priority criterion to section 5202 for states that allow charter schools to access state pre-k funding on an equitable basis with school districts and other non-profit organizations in the state. This creates an incentive for states to allow charter schools to offer pre-k and provide them equitable access to pre-k funding. Finally, in section 5205, as a national activity, require the Secretary of Education to provide charter schools with assistance in applying for federal funds, including Head Start and childcare funds, that can be used to provide pre-k, and to confer with the Secretary of Health and Human Services to eliminate barriers to charter schools accessing these and other funds that can be used for pre-k.

6) Combine NCLB's Title V block grant program with Head Start's newly authorized state early childhood coordination initiative to create a single "2020 Early Education" state grant program

NCLB's Title V block grant provides funds that states and school districts use to support a variety of activities. But no research shows the program is effective in improving student achievement, many activities it funds do not reflect national priorities, and as a result, funding has declined significantly since 2001. The new Head Start law authorizes three-year start up grants for states to coordinate early care and education programs for children from birth through school entry, but it does not identify a funding source for these efforts or require coordination to include the K-16 school system—a necessity to prevent the fade-out of early learning gains. NCLB reauthorization should restructure the Title V block grant and combine it with Head Start's coordination initiative to create new "2020 Early Education" state matching grants focused on a national priority—early education—and structured in a way that fights fade out. To receive 2020 Early Education grants, states should be required to designate an entity, such as a P-16 Coordinating Council or the State Advisory Councils on Early Education and Care created under the new Head Start law, with the mandate to align teacher and curricular standards for early childhood and elementary education and create a state plan for phasing-in universal pre-k access. Once these tasks are completed, states could use 2020 Early Education Grant funds to cover part of the costs of high-quality pre-k programs, starting with at-risk children. This policy would complement and build on the new Head Start legislation's efforts to better coordinate early childhood programs by expanding that focus to include coordination with K-12 public schools. Our proposed structure is modeled on the Goals 2000: Educate America Act grants of the early 1990s that successfully helped usher in the national standards-based school reform movement.¹¹

7) Require pre-k programs operated in public schools or with Title I funds to employ "highly qualified early educators" as lead teachers

NCLB should require all *lead* pre-k teachers in public school settings or in Title I-funded pre-k programs to meet "highly qualified" standards for early educators, just as it now requires K-12 teachers to be "highly qualified." Highly qualified educators should: (i) hold a bachelor's or higher degree with either an early education-related major or demonstrated knowledge and experience sufficient to teach young children effectively, or (ii) hold at least an associate's degree and meet a High, Objective, Uniform Standard of Evaluation, defined by the Secretary of Education, that is sufficiently rigorous to demonstrate the

individual is able to teach young children effectively. This national standard would raise the quality and status of pre-k teaching while also recognizing recent research findings that teacher education has imperfect value in predicting quality or student outcomes and that validly-observed teacher interactions with children can be a strong quality indicator.¹²

8) Create a "Pathways to Pre-kindergarten Teaching" alternative certification demonstration program

Improving the quality of pre-k programs requires increasing the supply of highly qualified early educators. In particular, there is a need for new teacher preparation models so that experienced early care and education workers who lack formal higher education credentials can gain the knowledge and skills to become highly qualified early educators without spending significant time and money on higher education coursework that may not improve their teaching. This program would support three to five model alternative certification programs to provide an expedited path to certification for experienced early educators who have not yet completed a college degree, as well as recent college graduates who have not completed an early educator certification program. To receive funding, programs must be based on scientifically-based research about early learning and the qualities of high-quality early educators. Grants to model alternative certification programs could be funded through a set-aside in the existing Transition to Teaching Program (funded at \$44 million in fiscal year 2007) or by repurposing funds from the existing Early Childhood Educator Professional Development Program (funded at \$14.6 million in fiscal year 2007). Pathways to Pre-kindergarten Teaching would preserve the Early Childhood Educator Professional Development Program's goal of improving the skills and knowledge of early childhood educators, but would focus those efforts on the national priority of preparing more qualified teachers to meet the demand from expanding state pre-k programs.

9) Provide targeted professional development to individual teachers

NCLB offers menus of interventions for schools identified for school improvement, corrective action, or reconstitution. But most of these options focus on school governance and structural changes—not the core of improving classroom teaching and learning. The menu of options for schools in improvement and corrective action under NCLB should be expanded to include "validated observational systems" that use standardized, research-based methods to observe teachers in the classroom, evaluate the quality of their interactions with children, and provide meaningful feedback that helps them teach more effectively.

validated observational systems differ from the many other types of observations teachers undergo, because they are *reliable*—evaluations are consistent across different observers—and *valid*—there is solid evidence that the teacher behaviors they measure actually improve students’ learning. An example of such a system is the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), which is currently used to rate quality of early childhood classrooms in Minnesota, Virginia and Los Angeles. CLASS can be paired with a technology-based professional development resource, My Teaching Partner.Com, which provides individualized coaching to help teachers improve. Adding CLASS and other validated observational systems linked to high-quality professional development to the menu of interventions would help schools in school improvement and corrective action improve classroom teaching and learning.¹³

10) Expand the representation of English Language Learners in pre-k programs

Students from non-English speaking homes benefit from high quality pre-kindergarten programs but often lack opportunities to participate in them. Latino children, in particular, attend pre-kindergarten at rates as much as one-third lower than those of non-Latino children, in part because language barriers make it difficult for their families to access these programs.¹⁴ NCLB’s Title III should encourage and help states to expand the number of English language learner (ELL) students in high-quality pre-k programs. The law should require states to set annual objectives to increase the percentage of English language learner children attending pre-kindergarten programs (as part of the annual objectives states must set under section 3122). It should also require states and local school districts to describe how they will increase ELL children’s representation in pre-k (in the state and local plans required under Sections 3113 and 3116). To help states and school districts meet these goals, Section 3115 should clearly state that

local school districts may use Title III funds to provide pre-kindergarten and other early education programs for ELL children below the age of compulsory school attendance. These changes would both pressure and help states and school districts to increase the number of English language learners participating in high quality early education programs that enable them to enter school with better language, literacy, and social and emotional skills.

Conclusion

Early education cannot simply be relegated to a special title in the next version of NCLB. Increasingly, pre-kindergarten is a part of the public education system—not something separate from it. Two-thirds of children in state-funded pre-k are attending programs run by public schools.¹⁵ Just like kindergarten a half a century ago, pre-kindergarten is slowly moving from something that’s seen as an add-on for poor kids who need help and rich kids whose parents can afford it, to a core part of a quality public education that should be available to all children. The entirety of the ESEA needs to take this new reality into account, and alter language and provisions to include publicly-funded pre-k programs.

Moreover, federal attention to early education must not be limited to pre-k. Evidence shows that the gains children make in high-quality pre-k will fade out if they are not supported by continued high-quality learning experiences in the early elementary years.¹⁶ Federal policies must help states and school districts improve early education in the years between pre-k and third grade, when NCLB’s accountability kicks in. By incorporating the policies we propose in NCLB reauthorization, Congress has the opportunity to make ESEA a catalyst for state, district, and school level initiatives to build high-quality systems of PK-3 early education.

ENDNOTES

¹ Dee Norman Lloyd, "Prediction of School Failure from Third Grade Data," *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 38:4 (Winter 1987): 1193-200.; Gene I. Maeroff, *Building Blocks: Making Children Successful in the Early Years of School* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 87.

² Meredith Phillips, James Crouse, and John Ralph, "Does the Black-White Test Score Gap Widen after Children Enter School?" in *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, ed. Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1998).

³ Danielle Ewen and Hannah Matthews, *Title I and Early Childhood Programs: A Look at Investments in the NCLB Era* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Law and Social Policy, October 2007); National Child Care Information Center, *Federal and State Funding for Early Care and Education* <http://www.nccic.org/poptopics/ecarefunding.html>.

⁴ Calculations based FY 2007 appropriations amounts for these programs, available from U.S. Department of Education Budget Office <http://www.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget08/08action.pdf>.

⁵ W. Steven Barnett, Jason T. Hustedt, Laura E. Hawkinson, and Kenneth B. Robin, *The State of Preschool 2006*. (New Brunswick, N.J., 2006), 7 <http://nieer.org/yearbook/pdf/yearbook.pdf>.

⁶ Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, *Guidance for the Reading First Program* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2002), 31 <http://www.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/guidance.pdf>.

⁷ Barnett, Hustedt, Hawkinson, and Robin, *The State of Preschool 2006*.

⁸ Michael Casserly, "America's Great City Schools: Moving in the Right Direction," in *No Remedy Left Behind*, ed. Frederick M. Jess and Chester D. Finn, Jr. (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 2007), 58. Casserly states that among 40 urban school districts participating in a survey administered by the Council of Great City Schools, the average district spend 17.4 percent of its Title I allocation on public school choice and SES.

⁹ Ewen and Matthews, *Title I and Early Childhood Programs: A Look at Investments in the NCLB Era*.

¹⁰ For more on the design and results of high-quality PK-3 schools, see Maeroff, *Building Blocks: Making children Successful in the Early Years of School*.

¹¹ Justin King, *Closing the Achievement Gap Through Expanded Access to Quality Early Education in Grades PK-3* (Washington, D.C.: New America Foundation, 2006.)

¹² See, for example: Diane M. Early, Kelly L. Maxwell, Margaret Burchinal, Soumya Alva, Randall H. Bender, Donna Bryant, Karen Cai, Richard M. Clifford, Caroline Ebanks, James A. Griffin, Gary T. Henry, Carollee Howes, Jeniffer Iriondo-Perez, Hyun-Joo Jeon, Andrew J. Mashburn, Ellen Peisner-Feinberg, Robert C. Pianta, Nathan Vandergrift, and Nicholas Zill, "Teachers' Education, Classroom Quality, and Young Children's Academic Skills: Results From Seven Studies of Preschool Programs," *Child Development* 78:2, pages 558-580

¹³ Bridget Hamre, Jennifer LoCasale-Crouch, and Robert Pianta, "Formative Assessment of Classrooms: Using Classroom Observation to Improve Implementation Quality," in *Creating Preschool Centers of Excellence in Language and Literacy*, ed. L. Justice, & C. Vukelich (New York: Guilford, forthcoming).

¹⁴ Luis M. Laosa and Pat Ainsworth, *Is Public Pre-K Preparing Hispanic Children to Succeed in School?* (New Brunswick, N.J.: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2007) <http://nieer.org/docs/?DocID=170>; National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, *Para Nuestros Niños: Expanding and Improving Early Education for Hispanics* (March 2007) http://www.ecehispanic.org/work/expand_MainReport.pdf.

¹⁵ Barnett, Hustedt, Hawkinson, and Robin, *The State of Preschool 2006*.

¹⁶ Kristie Kauerz, *Ladders of Learning* (Washington, D.C.: New America Foundation, 2006).