Close Opportunity Gaps and Boost Economies with Early Learning

African-American, Hispanic and low-income children, on average, lag behind their white and more-affluent peers in math and reading at kindergarten entry.

- African-American: 8.9 months behind in MATH, 6.7 months behind in READING
- Hispanic: 10.8 months behind in MATH
- Low-income: 11.5 months behind in READING, 11.2 months behind in MATH
- Average: 13 months behind in READING

As subsequent learning depends on critical brain development that occurs in the first eight years of life, these gaps are difficult to close through intervention in K-12 education.

Investments in early learning align with this brain development research, giving it a high return on investment (ROI).

Studies have estimated that for every dollar invested in early learning programs, the public can expect a return of $2 to $17 depending on the program’s scale, and savings accrued in short-term, intermediate and long-term benefits.

- **Short-term benefits**: Improved school readiness rates for young learners, cognitively, socially and emotionally
- **Intermediate benefits**: Improved academic achievement, reduced special education placement and lower grade retention rates in elementary and middle school
- **Long-term benefits**: Improved high school graduation rates, higher labor market earnings, reduced crime and delinquency rates, reduced welfare use and improved health and health-related behaviors

It’s estimated that high-quality pre-K programs aimed at African-American and Latino children could close 12 percent to 40 percent of the education gaps in the U.S., resulting in a $49 trillion gain in GDP.

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the 2015 federal education law, states have policy options for closing opportunity and school readiness gaps by supporting early learning, including:

- Emphasizing equity in accountability and reporting
- Increasing equitable access to high-quality pre-K
- Structuring school turnaround with a pre-K through third grade (P-3) focus
- Improving transitions from pre-K to K
- Supporting high-quality teaching and learning in P-3
- Providing students and families with wraparound services
- Supporting English language learners

Learn more at ncsl.org/closinggaps
What policies and strategies can states use to close early learning opportunity gaps?

States have flexibility under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to close early learning opportunity gaps. Below are a few examples.

**Strengthen and align early learning systems** – ESSA lists early learning as an allowable use of Title I funds, and gives states flexibility to improve the quality of their early learning systems. ESSA also reauthorized the Preschool Development Grant Program to help states increase access to high-quality early learning programs and requires Title I districts to have coordination, alignment and kindergarten transition plans in place under ESSA.

- 43 states plus Washington, D.C., addressed early learning program coordination in their state plans.
- Nebraska has set a long-term goal in its state plan that 95 percent of elementary schools will identify at least one high-quality early childhood program that is accessible to all of the school’s pre-k student population.

**Use accountability and reporting to identify and close gaps** – ESSA is designed to promote greater transparency about educational opportunities. For example, Title I requires states to report the number and percentage of student enrolled in pre-K programs. ESSA also allows states to use early learning as a strategy for improving low-performing schools.

- 12 states plus Washington, D.C., now incorporate early learning into their accountability systems (Maryland has included early learning indicators in state and local report cards).
- 15 states plus Washington, D.C., include a focus on early learning (e.g. access to high-quality pre-K, needs assessments) as a school turnaround strategy.
- Over 30 states are monitoring chronic absenteeism in the early grades.
- Oklahoma will collect longitudinal data to document effects of its universal pre-K on all student groups, and includes K-3 literacy as a component of school ratings and report cards.

**Examine students’ access to highly-effective teachers and develop the capacity of early learning educators** – ESSA requires states to ensure that low-income, minority, English language learner and special needs students are not taught at higher rates than other children by inexperienced, unqualified or out-of-field teachers. ESSA also gives states the flexibility to use professional development funding for early learning capacity building.

- 31 states are using Title I funds for early learning professional development.
- Six states are providing professional development to pre-K through third grade (P-3) teachers.
- Oregon is using this funding to support cross-sector P-3 professional development.

**Take a comprehensive approach to supporting students** – Title IV allows states to provide enrichment opportunities such as STEM education, music and the arts (38 states). Additionally, Title IV allows funding for 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Promise Neighborhoods and full-service community schools, all of which focus on community and family engagement and provide wraparound services (e.g. after school learning opportunities, health screenings, educational services for parents).

- Oregon has proposed developing social-emotional standards for kindergarten.
- Delaware and Iowa will conduct developmental screenings to support social emotional learning and development.
- Nevada proposed to build practices and policies to support a birth-3rd grade system.
- Idaho addressed its literacy screening and monitoring system to better guide intervention in K-3 grades.

**Support English Language Learners (ELLS)** – Under ESSA, states are required to monitor ELL performance as part of Title I (moved from Title III, emphasizing ELLs in state accountability systems). States can use Title III subgrants to strengthen or develop early learning programs to improve outcomes and school readiness for young ELLs.

- 11 states now allow the use of ELL funding to be used in pre-K grades.
- Texas has included annual training for districts to ensure that ELL reclassification procedures are conducted with fidelity and in accordance with state regulations.
- Wisconsin’s ESSA plan includes providing an ELL Policy Handbook for practitioners created by ELL experts and educators.

Learn more at ncsl.org/closinggaps