



September 11, 2009

The Hon. Tom Harkin, Chairman-designee
Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
731 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Hon. Michael Enzi, Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
379 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senators Harkin and Enzi:

Pre-K Now, a campaign of the Pew Center on the States, has worked in more than 30 states to secure high-quality voluntary pre-kindergarten for three and four year olds, to give them a strong start in life and bring significant, research-proven returns on public investments. Based on our leadership role in advancing pre-k in the states, we write to share recommendations on the Early Learning Challenge Fund legislation.

We commend the House Committee on Education and Labor for approving the Early Learning Challenge Fund (H.R. 3221), and look forward to a strong “yes” vote in the House very shortly. We support the goals of improved program quality and coordination among early learning programs serving children from birth to five years of age. We are nonetheless concerned that the House version may not lead to significant growth in high-quality early learning opportunities. Despite significant gains in pre-k access and quality, today only 22 percent of four year olds have access to quality state-funded pre-k, and almost half a million at-risk children are left behind. As written, the bill does little to encourage states to continue growing their pre-k programs. We believe a more significant, targeted, federal investment is needed. And, we need levers in this bill to encourage school districts to create more high-quality pre-k classrooms. We look to the Senate HELP Committee to help states expand pre-k to more low-income children.

We recommend:

- (1) Dedicated federal funding to take state pre-k to scale to serve the nation’s at-risk four year olds.** We recommend that the Senate include a targeted pre-k grant program as envisioned in bills drafted by Senators Murray and Casey (S. 240 and 839, respectively).

Against today's backdrop of high unemployment and reduced public expenditures in states across the country, it is more urgent than ever for the Senate to provide federal support for programs that generate strong returns on investment and promote school readiness and achievement.

(2) A strong tie to existing education funding streams including incentives for states and local education agencies to use Title I funds for pre-k. The Obama administration has twice proposed to provide Title I funds specifically for state pre-k, and twice congressional committees have rejected this proposal. Title I was created in the last century to provide a compensatory boost to the poorest children. No intervention is as well-researched and as successful in narrowing the achievement gap as is high-quality pre-k. We recommend that:

- the Secretary of Education give priority in selecting states for challenge grants based on “assurances that the state will work with local education agencies to use funds under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act for activities described in section 403(f)” with the latter referring to the uses of grant funds; and
- the legislation include an amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act providing a 15 percent set-aside of Title I funds explicitly for state pre-k programs. We are happy to provide legislative language on both recommendations.

(3) A requirement that programs funded through the challenge fund, and programs receiving federal funds including Head Start and the Child Care and Development Block Grant, become a part of the state's quality improvement system. The House committee report emphasizes building quality early learning programs to better serve at-risk children, and envisions a quality improvement process that extends from care for infants through pre-kindergarten. Today, few states require all programs serving high-need children to participate in quality improvement efforts. Without meaningful enforcement there is no assurance that the early education programs in a state receiving a challenge grant will actually participate in the quality improvement system.

That participation could be assured through a collaboration agreement drafted at the state level as part of the challenge grant application process, or through amendments to federal law governing Head Start, Early Head Start and the Child Care and Development Block Grant.

(4) Clear and specific definitions of what comprises a “quality” program. The Senate HELP Committee bills, S. 240 and 839, include definitions of program quality, including teachers with a bachelor's degree, small class size and comprehensive services. The challenge fund language adopted by the House committee does not provide a similar definition, and we recommend more specificity on what “quality” means. One option would be to cite specific benchmarks associated with quality early learning programs, such as those included in the statute authorizing the Head Start program.

(5) Meaningful family engagement provisions. We recommend that family engagement provisions go beyond explaining the quality rating system to parents to ensure meaningful family engagement policies are in place in all participating states. The state applications should include a description of processes for working in partnership with families to design, implement, monitor and evaluate a range of strategies, including policies that will increase awareness of the role families play in their child's early development and learning and provide a continuum of opportunities for families to be active contributors to their children's education. Participating programs should provide families with specific and ongoing information on their child's development and learning progress. Professional development provisions should include ongoing training for teachers and other educators on effective approaches for engaging families, and a state program rating system should include a mechanism for monitoring and evaluation of family engagement policies and practices at the state and program level.

We appreciate the opportunity to share our recommendations with the Senate HELP Committee, and would be happy to provide additional information on the movement for high-quality, voluntary pre-k for America's youngest learners. Please feel free to contact either of us, or Anya Malkov, government relations associate, at amalkov@pewtrusts.org.

Thank you for your consideration, and thank you for your leadership on policies and programs benefiting children and families.

Sincerely yours,



Marci Young, Director
Pre-K Now



Kathy Patterson, Senior Officer
Pew Center on the States

cc: Members, Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions