Maximizing Reform in the Stimulus Bill:
Supporting Effective Early Education

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May 2009

The Challenge:

Countless studies have shown that high-quality pre-kindergarten programs narrow achievement gaps and produce long-term gains in student learning and educational attainment. States have made substantial investments in pre-K and other early education programs over the past decade. But current state budget shortfalls threaten states’ progress in improving access to high-quality early education programs.

The Solution: Use ARRA Funds Creatively to Support Quality Early Education Programs

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) provides states and school districts with an opportunity to invest in early education. In particular, states can use funds provided under the Child Care and Development Block Grant program (CCDBG) quality set-aside, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Preschool and Infants and Toddlers programs, and Title I School Improvement set-aside, as well as funds for Head Start State Early Advisory Councils to support and sustain pre-K programs. Districts also can use funds provided under Title I and, in some cases, the Education and Government Services Stabilization Funds, to support and sustain pre-K programs. Smart use of these funds can allow states and school districts to not only maintain existing pre-K services but also improve access, quality and alignment in early education, generating long-term educational benefits and financial savings.

Investing In High Quality Pre-K

When states and districts are developing policies to promote pre-K programs, they should ensure the programs are of a high quality so that they can produce long-term educational and economic returns. A program that is little more than babysitting will not help states and school districts meet the stimulus legislation’s ambitious goals for improvement and reform. For a pre-K program to be considered “high quality it should contain all of the following elements:

- **Qualified teachers:** Employ qualified lead teachers with a bachelor’s degree and training in how young children learn
- **Small class sizes:** Maintain class sizes of no more than 20 students with at least a teacher and teacher’s aide
- **High-quality curriculum:** Use a clearly articulated curriculum that is aligned with state standards and designed to support children’s language, literacy, early math and social-emotional development
- **Alignment with elementary education:** Ensure the pre-K and elementary school curriculum is aligned.

Using Short-Term Funding to Produce Long-Term Results
There are multiple investments states and districts can make with ARRA funding that will continue to produce benefits even after stimulus dollars are gone. Some of these long-term investments include:

1. **Integrating early education investments with K-12 school improvement efforts:** Early education investments will have limited value if children proceed from quality pre-K into schools that are ill-equipped to build on their early learning gains. States and school districts must ensure early childhood programs employ standards, curricula and teaching strategies aligned with those of the schools that will serve children after pre-K, and they must invest in strategies that build linkages between quality early childhood programs and K-12 schools.

2. **Leveraging existing programs:** In most states and communities, early childhood education is provided through a patchwork of agencies and programs, including state-funded pre-K, district-initiated programs, Head Start, child-care centers and family-based care. State and district policymakers seeking to maximize the impacts of stimulus dollars must think creatively about how to use those funds to leverage existing providers and programs — for example, by working collaboratively with Head Start programs to improve program quality or by aligning pre-K curriculum across providers in a district — rather than reinventing the wheel.

3. **Building infrastructure:** Most states and school districts lack the infrastructure to support quality early education programs in a systemic way. State and district-level policymakers should use stimulus funds to make necessary investments in building the infrastructure — from buildings, to data and monitoring systems, to teacher professional development — needed to support quality early education systems, both now and when improved state fiscal conditions allow further expansion.

**Successfully Investing in Early Learning**

**Invest in Quality Rating and Improvement Systems:** Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) are designed to collect and disseminate information about the quality of early childhood providers so that policymakers and consumers can make informed choices about individual programs. States can use the CCDBG quality set-aside and other funds provided under the stimulus to support the development, implementation or expansion of QRIS systems. Districts can promote early care and education quality in their communities by using Title I funds to provide incentives to providers that receive high QRIS scores.

**Provide training and support to community-based child care providers:** States seeking to improve access to quality pre-K options can encourage districts to use Title I funds to provide all pre-K teachers in the district — including those working in district-run programs, Head Start and community-based pre-K providers — with training to implement a research-based pre-K curriculum aligned with the curriculum used in the district's elementary grades. Districts also can use Title I funds to hire master teachers, who help teachers in both district-operated and community-based programs improve the quality of their teaching, or to pay for or supplement the salaries of certified teachers working in community-based pre-K programs.

**Use a preK-3rd strategy to turn around low-performing elementary schools:** The ARRA provides $3 billion in funds for states and districts to turn around chronically low-performing schools. States and districts can use these funds to convert low-performing elementary schools into pre-K - 3rd grade early education academies that offer pre-K, full-day kindergarten and a vertically aligned curriculum, emphasizing literacy, language and social-emotional development to ensure all students achieve on grade-level by the end of 3rd grade. This research-based approach, which offers a compelling vision for whole-school reform, has been effective in turning around low-performing schools in Maryland's Montgomery and Baltimore Counties. Pre-K - 3rd reforms also can be employed at the district level to improve chronically low-performing districts, an approach that has succeeded in several of New Jersey’s high-poverty Abbott school districts.

**Refurbish or build facilities for early education uses:** Lack of access to appropriate facilities can be a major obstacle to expanding pre-K access. Because Education Stabilization Funds may be used for facility repair, renovation and construction, school districts can use these funds to build or refurbish
appropriate spaces for pre-K programs. Districts can use these facilities to house their own pre-K programs or rent them to high-quality community-based pre-K and Head Start programs at a reduced cost, increasing the number of students these programs can serve and strengthening linkages and alignment between community-based pre-K and the k-12 system.

The Benefits

High-quality pre-K programs have been shown to improve student achievement and help narrow achievement gaps — which are the central goals for states and school districts under both ARRA and the No Child Left Behind Act. States seeking to earn access to federal Race to the Top funds, or districts hoping to access under the ARRA, especially should consider these strategies. Research also shows that investments in high-quality early education produces financial benefits for states and school districts by reducing rates of special education placement and grade retention, and the costs associated with them.

States and districts planning to use ARRA funds to build a solid foundation for greater gains in student achievement should make investments in early learning a central part of their ARRA investment strategy.

This briefing memo was a joint collaboration of The New America Foundation (NAF) and the Education Commission of the States (ECS). If you have any questions or comments about this paper, please contact Sara Mead at NAF (mead@newamerica.net) or Michael Griffith at ECS (mgriffith@ecs.org).