



**first 5 years fund**

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## The Early Learning Challenge Fund

The Early Learning Challenge Fund is a legislative opportunity to make a smart, cost-effective investment that will provide short- and long-term educational, social, and economic benefits. The Early Learning Challenge Fund helps states develop America's greatest economic resource—its people.

### What is the Early Learning Challenge Fund?

The Early Learning Challenge Fund (ELCF) is a proposed federal program that would provide competitive grants to states to connect disparate early learning programs into a more cost-effective, coherent, high-quality system.

Two types of grants would be available:

**Quality Pathways** grants would be renewable five-year grants awarded to states already demonstrating progress toward a comprehensive, high-quality early learning system.

**Development** grants would be three-year, non-renewable grants to states that are starting to develop quality early learning systems. The grant would support planning and development, with the expectation that by the end of the grant term, states would be positioned to apply for a Quality Pathways grant.

The Early Learning Challenge Fund will be administered jointly by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education.

### The Early Learning Challenge Fund will support:

- Enhanced **professional development** to improve teacher quality
- Increased **accountability** through more rigorous review and monitoring of program quality
- Coordination of **screenings** for disabilities, health and mental health needs to meet child's and caregiver's needs and to avoid duplication
- Greater **family engagement** in child's development in early years and beyond
- Development of understandable program **quality standards** and assessments
- Quality **data systems** to track and improve child outcomes
- Better **coordination** among local, state, and federal programs

## Why is the Early Learning Challenge Fund important?

**Collecting good data and developing strong assessments and rigorous measures of quality will help policymakers, practitioners, and parents know if children are learning, if programs are getting results, and if taxpayer dollars are being used wisely.** Quality information about young children and the programs that serve them enables stakeholders to make thoughtful plans and tough decisions. The Early Learning Challenge Fund would provide the resources necessary to identify gaps in services, target improvement efforts, and track progress over time.

**Programs that serve at-risk young children and their families are most effective when they're supported by a strong infrastructure that ensures services are coordinated and comprehensive.**

A young child can interact with many different agencies and care providers, each one tasked with providing a specialized service and meeting a specific subset of a family's needs. With the Early Learning Challenge Fund acting as the "glue" between those programs, each one will be better able to communicate, to streamline, and to eliminate redundancy. It's easier for families to find the services they need, and it's easier for programs to ensure they're reaching the families that need them most.

## The Early Learning Challenge Fund must incorporate the following key principles:

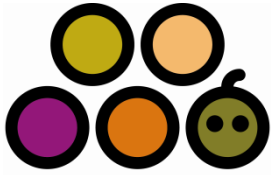
**Birth to five:** Grants must go toward programs and services that primarily serve at-risk children from birth to age five.

**Assessments:** Maintaining the research and development efforts in the bill, which focus on all domains of development (cognitive, social-emotional, physical, and approaches to learning) is essential for creating strong assessment measures for kindergarten readiness. While the early learning field develops additional measures, it is important that existing assessments focus on improving classroom environment and instruction, professional development, and screening to determine needs for services—not on rewarding or sanctioning individual children or teachers.

**National definition of "high-quality":** The proposal must call for a clear definition of what "high-quality" services are and must also set clear and measurable goals and benchmarks for states to improve quality over time.

## Pass the Early Learning Challenge Fund now to start building a better US.

Last fall the House passed the Early Learning Challenge Fund, and now Congress must finish the job and send the bill to the President. It is a cost effective investment in people, our economy, and the future that will pay dividends for generations to come. Early childhood education is the engine that drives success for individuals, society, and the economy. This important investment will help states give children and families the support they need to reach their full potential and contribute to our nation's economy now and in the future.



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## Start here and you'll finish with a better US.

**Early childhood education builds a smarter US.** It drives school readiness, prevents the achievement gap, and delivers college and career success. It is instrumental in reducing the need for special education and remediation—and key to producing highly capable adults.

**Early childhood education builds a prosperous US.** Nobel Prize Laureate economist James Heckman has shown that every dollar invested in quality early childhood education for at-risk children delivers economic gains of 10% per year through increased achievement and adult productivity.

**Early childhood education builds a healthier US.** It sets children on the right path—giving them the ability to understand what it takes to live a healthy life and the will power to act upon it, skills that are critical to eating right, exercising and refraining from unhealthy behaviors like smoking and drug use.

**Early childhood education builds a stronger US.** It fuses knowledge with character—giving children the backbone they need to work hard, work together, and walk tall through life.

## Three legislative opportunities this year present smart, cost-effective investments:

**Establish the Early Learning Challenge Fund.** The Early Learning Challenge Fund is a proposed federal program that would provide competitive grants to states to connect disparate early learning programs into a more cost-effective, coherent, and high-quality system. The U.S. House approved the Challenge Fund in a bipartisan vote in 2009.

**Maintain funding for Head Start, Early Head Start, and the Child Care and Development Block Grant.** Head Start (for preschoolers), Early Head Start (for infants and toddlers), and the Child Care and Development Block Grant play a critical role in helping children learn and their families work. American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds provided for the programs have been crucial in enabling them to help children and families in states and communities across the country and must be sustained.

**Integrate early childhood education in Elementary and Secondary Education Act Reauthorization.** ESEA is slated for reauthorization, and early learning must be fully incorporated into all pillars of the Act to yield better long-term educational outcomes for children. Reauthorization must include a birth to five component within all the Act's provisions – including development of longitudinal data systems, teacher quality, work with struggling and at-risk children, standards and assessments, and family engagement.