

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) Early Childhood Commission convened leaders from 16 states, including N.C. Senator Tamara Barringer, to recommend policies that will build a stronger foundation for young children as they begin school. Commissioners outlined recommendations for five priority areas considered the most important as states address and evaluate early childhood programs: **program quality, teacher quality, accountability, access, and governance.**

**Program Quality: *Provide incentives to improve quality in early childhood development programs.***

In early childhood education programs, quality matters. **Providing quality programs and teachers** for early childhood programs **yields high return on investment.** Highly skilled workers, age-appropriate-based curricula, language-rich environments, responsive child-teacher interactions, consistent child interactions, small class size and high adult-to-child ratios are all principal elements of quality in childhood development programs, according to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University.

**Teacher Quality: *Develop and sustain a high-quality early childhood program workforce with the competencies to foster the social, emotional, and cognitive development of young children.***

In order to maintain such high-quality programs, high-quality teachers are necessary. According to University of Virginia researcher Robert Pianta, **the quality of teacher-student interactions has the greatest impact** on students' academic achievement and social skill development. Therefore, policymakers must ensure there are programs in place to produce the necessary early childhood teachers.

**Accountability: *Enact state accountability systems that assess program performance and reward quality.***

Measuring the outcomes of early childhood programs are as equally important as providing quality education. Most states have implemented **accountability systems**, such as longitudinal studies, to **provide information** to drive more-informed decisions about early childhood programs, financing, and policies. Longitudinal studies promote accountability and **provide insight** on the effectiveness of services.

**Access: *Provide high-quality early learning services to the groups of young children most likely to benefit from interventions.***

**The readiness gap** at kindergarten entry **can be attributed**, in large part, to **disparities in access** to high-quality early learning. According to a July 2012 report of the National Center for Education Statistics' Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, at kindergarten entry, children in poverty score lower on reading and math assessments. Many policymakers believe **policies and funding should be targeted to those most at-risk** and those who may benefit the most from increased access to quality early childhood education programs.

**Governance: *Establish a comprehensive and integrated framework of policies and programs that supports early childhood development in the state.***

Child development programs are multidimensional and are often fragmented across several systems and organizations. **A coordinated governance structure for early childhood programs is one way to eliminate duplicated services, service gaps, confusion for families, and funding inefficiencies.** Some states have created an office or department of early learning as a separate agency, while others have developed a division for early childhood within an existing agency, such as the state department of education. No matter the structure, a statewide governance of early childhood programs can play a significant role in bridging the divide among early childhood programs and the K-12 system.

Investing in our children early has proven over time to yield benefits in academic achievement, health, social, and economic outcomes. Having a comprehensive, research-based approach to early education state policy is critical for return on investment, and ensuring that young children get the best possible start in school and in life.



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