



Taking Action on Early Learning

17 Executive Actions for Governors

By Jessica Troe and Simon Workman November 18, 2016

In the early 1990s, former North Carolina Gov. Jim Hunt (D) was on his farm in rural Wilson County contemplating his next steps after a successful eight-year term. One chilly morning, he noticed a small child wearing only a diaper with an empty bottle hanging out of his mouth, apparently alone. As governor, Hunt had made education one of his top priorities, but he had also heard from kindergarten teachers that children were arriving at school without foundational skills. Gov. Hunt decided he would run again for North Carolina's top office, this time making early childhood initiatives a cornerstone of his administration.¹ He was re-elected in 1993 and went on to launch the Smart Start initiative, which created a public-private partnership to fund early childhood programs in all 100 North Carolina counties. The state became a leader in early education as one of the first states to develop a quality rating and improvement system, or QRIS, to systematically improve the quality of child care.

Gov. Hunt's story demonstrates the power of a strong state leader with a clear vision for young children. Governors throughout the country have led the way in initiating preschool programs and early childhood initiatives, but much work remains to be done. The importance of early learning programs from birth to school entry has been well established,² but U.S. policies and state and federal investment have not kept pace to reach all, or even most, vulnerable young children.³ With child care and early learning receiving renewed attention in the national debate, state leaders will be critical in the coming years to making the case and lead by example.

Early learning and the importance of an early learning continuum

This issue brief uses the term "early learning" to encompass home visiting, child care, and preschool programs. It is important to understand that the different terms used to describe these programs do not connote differences in need. In fact, children in their earliest years, especially those living in economically disadvantaged households, are best set up for success when they receive early learning services from birth to school entry. These programs make up what the authors refer to as the early learning continuum.

17 executive actions governors can take to support high-quality early learning programs

Theme	Executive action
Create a vision for early learning	1. Develop a statewide strategic plan
Convene groups to prioritize early learning	2. Establish task forces
	3. Form a children’s cabinet
Raise public awareness about the importance of early learning	4. Appoint a business advisory committee
	5. Lead a public awareness campaign on the need to support early learning
Create a governing structure that supports early learning	6. Promote the importance of quality
	7. Create an office of early learning and encourage interagency coordination
Identify gaps between revenue and expenses for high-quality early learning programs	8. Appoint an early learning advisor within the governor’s immediate office
	9. Conduct a cost of quality study
Maximize federal funding opportunities for early learning programs	10. Align financial incentives with the actual cost of quality
	11. Include increased funding for early learning in state budget
Use data more effectively	12. Use Medicaid financing for home visiting programs
	13. Initiate applications for federal funding competitions
Link providers to state early learning systems	14. Require interagency data collaboration and utilize data to map needs and tailor services
	15. Develop a centralized intake system
	16. Require all licensed providers to participate in the state QRIS
	17. Maximize the effectiveness of workforce registries

Governors can become early childhood leaders by setting a vision for early learning and adopting it as a key agenda item. Through the power of their office, governors can direct attention to early learning and generate energy for action across their state. Governors can utilize executive orders and direct state agencies to ensure early learning programs are administered efficiently, funding streams are maximized, and the early learning continuum is inclusive of all children. Governors can also lead the charge to increase funding for early childhood programs and work with their legislature to prioritize state investments in young children.

As governors consider their priorities, this issue brief provides recommendations on ways that state executive branches can support early learning programs. Children and families need broad, sweeping changes that make high-quality early learning programs accessible and affordable to low-income and middle-class Americans alike. Such changes will only come about with significant additional funding, which requires sustained commitment to early learning and state legislatures willing to pass budgets that prioritize early learning. While a governor’s power can be limited in this regard, there are still important actions they can take to signal the importance of early learning and lay the foundation for bigger change.

In this issue brief, the Center for American Progress outlines 17 nonlegislative actions that support early learning programs. While not every recommendation is appropriate or feasible in every state, all are intended to present options for state executives who are committed to taking action on this critical issue.

Create a state vision for early learning

Governors' first step toward realizing high-quality early learning in their state is to lay out a vision and plan for a comprehensive early childhood system. They can accomplish this by developing a statewide strategic plan.

1. Develop a statewide strategic plan

To take this step, governors should commission an assessment of their state's early learning needs based on existing strengths and challenges. Any strategic plan should identify goals and the incremental steps necessary to achieve them. Given that many states have multiple early learning programs already, the plan should inventory current programs and revenues and identify gaps in the birth to school entry early learning continuum. Most states have developed guidelines that define what children should learn between birth and kindergarten entry. These can help governors identify their state's goals and the services needed to achieve them for all age groups and vulnerable populations, such as low-income children, English language learners, and migrant families.⁴

The strategic planning process should be inclusive of diverse early childhood stakeholders, including advocates, policymakers, parents and teachers, and community leaders. Incorporating multiple stakeholders will ensure that the plan considers the needs of children and families and is responsive to diverse communities and each of a state's regions. This can help state actors work efficiently toward a common goal and create buy-in for the strategic plan.



In 2011, **California** Gov. Jerry Brown (D) convened a State Advisory Council on Early Learning and Care to assess his state's current early learning landscape and identify the needs of children and families. More than 2,700 stakeholders engaged in the plan development process, including parents, providers, and state and local agencies. The council's Comprehensive Early Learning Plan, published in 2013,⁵ was intended to create greater coherence among early learning programs in the state. It constructed a vision for an effective early learning continuum and offered core recommendations for how this vision could be achieved.

Convene groups to prioritize early learning

Governors need to convene policymakers, administration officials, early learning program leaders, and others to prioritize early learning across their state. They can do this by establishing task forces, forming a children’s cabinet in their administration, and appointing a business advisory committee.

2. Establish task forces

Governors can convene task forces to develop a strategic plan or address a pressing early childhood issue in their state. Typically, a task force meets for a specified period of time and concludes with the release of a report detailing its findings and recommending next steps. In the past, governors have used task forces to develop recommendations for early childhood workforce compensation, early literacy, the development of early learning guidelines, and increasing the quality of current programs. Generally, a task force is comprised of public and private stakeholders, including administration officials, early learning program leaders, advocacy groups, parents, civic and business representatives, and policymakers.



In 2009, **Kentucky** Gov. Steve Beshear (D) established the Governor’s Task Force on Early Childhood Development and Education through an executive order.⁶ The Kentucky secretaries for education and health and family services co-chaired the 28-member task force, which included public and private child care providers, school system personnel, college professors, business people, and state agency administrators.⁷ Gov. Beshear charged the task force with developing a unified vision for early childhood development policy in Kentucky, including focusing on collaboration among providers, increasing program quality, using early learning standards and assessment, and increasing the efficiency of the early learning system. The task force met a total of 16 times over 18 months and produced a report with eight recommendations.⁸

3. Form a children’s cabinet

Children’s cabinets differ from task forces in that they are typically permanent bodies with a broad focus on policies that affect children from birth to college. They include government officials from state agencies, such as heads of departments and agencies that affect children’s early learning, health, and development. Children’s cabinets do not typically include experts from outside the governor’s administration. Bringing multiple agencies together into a children’s cabinet can foster communication across departments and help ensure consistency in policy priorities within the executive branch.⁹



Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley (R) created a children’s cabinet by executive order in 2016.¹⁰ The cabinet serves as an advisory body on issues that the state’s children face—formulating policy solutions and encouraging innovation.¹¹ The cabinet focuses on developing a comprehensive strategy to early learning through a uniform approach to data collection, quality assurance, and outcomes measurement.¹² The governor chairs the cabinet, which also includes the state superintendent for education, the commissioner for mental health, and the executive director for youth services.

4. Appoint a business advisory committee

Ensuring children can access high-quality early learning benefits the economy in two main ways: First, it supports children’s development and, in turn, prepares children to be productive future workers. Second, it supports the current workforce by allowing parents to continue working. Business leaders can be strong advocates for early learning programs by highlighting these economic benefits.¹³ Governors can elevate the business case for early learning through appointing a business advisory committee.



In 2008, then-Gov. Ed Rendell (D) created the **Pennsylvania** Early Learning Investment Commission by executive order.¹⁴ The commission is headed by the governor, state agency heads, and business leaders who represent diverse industries and regions. These leaders are tasked with explaining the economic benefits of early learning to policymakers and other business leaders and advocating for public sector investment in quality early learning. The commission has continued under three governors and receives operating support from private philanthropy.¹⁵

Raise public awareness of the importance of early learning

Governors should focus on raising the public’s awareness of early learning efforts. They can do this through leading a media campaign and promoting the importance of high-quality programs.

5. Lead a public awareness campaign on the need to support early learning

As a state’s top executive, governors have a high profile in the media and with the public. They can use their profile to draw attention to early learning and signal that it is a priority for their administration. Such activities might include visiting classrooms, holding press conferences, or addressing early learning in the annual State of the State address. To elevate the importance of early learning for children, families, and the broader community, the governor can direct state agencies to develop a public awareness campaign,

which can include ads on public transportation and billboards as well as public service announcements. Such a campaign might focus on child development or on how early learning programs support healthy development. States can target advertising materials at locations such as doctors' offices or social services agencies where families might participate in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC, or employment and job training.



In 2001, then-Gov. Scott McCallum (R) of **Wisconsin** supported the efforts of the public awareness campaign “THINK Big. Start Small. Invest Early in a Child’s Future.” His administration worked in coordination with the state’s child care resource and referral agency. The campaign promoted the importance of high-quality child care; how it should be supported in all settings, including child care centers and family child care homes; and the crucial role of the community in early learning. The campaign included TV and radio commercials, brochures, flyers, and billboards.¹⁶



In addition to general ongoing public awareness campaigns, governors can draw attention to early learning through an annual day or week of action. For example, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, or NAEYC, hosts an annual Week of the Young Child to celebrate the importance of early learning for young children across the United States.¹⁷ Governors can release a proclamation and coordinate activities across their state that focus on early learning.¹⁸ This helps raise awareness of young children’s needs and the ways in which communities can support child development. In 2016, **Alabama** Gov. Bentley proclaimed a Week of the Young Child in conjunction with NAEYC’s activities, urging Alabamans to recognize and support the needs of the state’s young children.¹⁹

6. Promote the importance of quality

The executive branch can also take the lead in promoting the importance of quality in early childhood programming. Almost every state now has a QRIS to measure and support quality. The executive branch can lead a public awareness campaign to elevate knowledge about the QRIS among multiple stakeholders—providers, families, community and business leaders, and school district leaders—so that they better understand the need for and importance of quality, as well as the necessity of the QRIS as a mechanism that helps programs achieve and maintain quality.



Minnesota’s QRIS, Parent Aware, helps parents understand the importance of quality and the differences in its star ratings of providers. Parent Aware’s budget allocates 10 percent for marketing—including radio, online, TV, and neighborhood ads—to promote the QRIS and the advantage of attending high-quality programs. As part of its 2016 annual evaluation, Parent Aware conducted a survey of providers who participate in the QRIS. It found that 51 percent of the providers agreed that families were more likely to choose their program because they participated in the QRIS.²⁰

Create a governing structure that supports early learning

Governors should create a governing structure that can support early learning both now and in the future. They can achieve this by creating an office of early learning and encouraging interagency coordination as well as appointing an early learning adviser to their staff.

7. Create an office of early learning and encourage interagency coordination

Typically, early learning programs are administered in more than one state agency. For example, the state child care licensing system usually resides in human services departments, while departments of education house state preschool programs. This can undermine coordination between programs. Some governors may have the authority to create a new agency that houses all early learning programs. At a minimum, however, all governors have the authority to direct existing agencies to coordinate with each other.²¹



In 2004, then-Gov. Sonny Perdue (R) of **Georgia** created the Department of Early Care and Learning, or DECAL, to streamline the state's early learning programs.²² By merging the work of multiple agencies,²³ Georgia was able to house services and resources for children from birth to school entry in one department,²⁴ allowing administrators to more effectively build shared systems that address issues such as professional development or program quality.



In 2008, then-Gov. Patrick of **Massachusetts** issued an executive order to require coordination between agencies tasked with administering early learning programs. This coordination involved the state departments of education, early education, and public health, as well as the state Head Start program. The executive order directed these agencies to jointly develop a framework for alignment between early learning and third grade.²⁵

8. Appoint an early learning adviser to the administration's staff

Governors can appoint an early learning adviser to their staff to ensure that the issue is a priority for their administration. This adviser can be a voice for early learning during budget and policy decision-making. Having a dedicated early learning adviser sends a strong message about the issue's importance to the governor and the state. Because advisers demonstrate the support of the governor's office, they can play a crucial role in ensuring successful coordination among state agencies and other stakeholders as well as work closely with any state task force, children's cabinet, or business advisory committee. An adviser's role only lasts for the lifetime of the administration, however, and should therefore be used as a supplemental mechanism to aligning state agencies.

Identify gaps between revenue and expenses for high-quality early learning programs

Governors should work to identify gaps between revenue and expenses for quality early learning programs. This can help states address the need for sufficient funding to support quality. To identify gaps, governors should conduct a cost of quality study. The results can be used to align financial incentives with the actual cost of quality and to justify increased funding for early learning in the state budget.

9. Conduct a cost of quality study

A cost of quality study can estimate the cost of operating an early childhood program that meets specific state standards. It can be used in conjunction with revenue data to quantify any gap between current funding streams—such as child care subsidies, preschool initiatives, Head Start, QRIS financial incentives, and private tuition—and the actual cost of providing high-quality services. The process of conducting a cost of quality study includes identifying key cost drivers in the quality standards, collecting relevant data—including from providers—and developing a model to calculate estimated program and per child costs for different ages and settings, such as a child care center or a family home.²⁶ These studies can be conducted by a state agency or by an external independent consultant or organization.

Knowing the level of resources required to provide high-quality services and highlighting the gaps in current funding streams provide governors with a powerful tool to advocate for increased state and federal funding. Additionally, these studies encourage providers to maximize current funding opportunities—such as participating in the Child and Adult Care Food Program or a state or city preschool initiative—and to implement good business practices that maximize revenue. Such business practices include engaging in a robust fee collection process or a strategy that ensures full enrollment. A number of states have conducted cost of quality studies in recent years, including Washington, Rhode Island, Delaware, Ohio, and the District of Columbia.²⁷

10. Align financial incentives with the actual cost of quality

Cost of quality studies can also be used to better align financial incentives in a QRIS with the actual cost of achieving and maintaining high quality. While many QRIS include tiered reimbursement—higher child care subsidy rates for higher quality programs—they are rarely tied to the actual cost of operating at high quality.²⁸ Many QRIS also include financial bonuses or awards for achieving a high rating, but again, these are insufficient to cover the cost of operating at high quality and are usually a one-time award, which have a limited effect over time. Understanding the actual costs that providers incur at higher-quality levels—including increased teacher compensation—can help states target tiered child care

subsidies and QRIS quality awards more appropriately so that programs are adequately incentivized and compensated for achieving high quality. These incentives can also include bridge to quality awards that help providers meet quality standards, rather than only rewarding programs once they have actually received a higher rating. Governors can direct their state agencies to use the findings from the cost of quality study to ensure financial incentives adequately reflect the cost to operate a high-quality program.



A cost of quality study in **Delaware** identified that the high cost of serving infants was a barrier for providers. As a result, the state created a financial incentive targeted at high-quality providers serving infants.²⁹



In response to its own cost of quality study, **Rhode Island** redesigned its quality awards to offer an additional bonus to providers serving infants and toddlers in order to account for the large gap between expenses and expected revenue at the higher-quality levels for these age groups.³⁰

11. Include increased funding for early childhood in state budget

Public funding for early childhood programs is insufficient to provide services to all eligible children and does not support the cost of operating a high-quality program. In addition, low- and middle-income families are struggling to afford the high cost of private tuition.³¹ In order to ensure access to affordable high-quality early learning for all children, states need to increase their public investment. Governors can include a request for increased funding in their budget proposals and use the influence of their office to advocate for it with the state legislature.

Maximize federal funding opportunities for early learning programs

Governors need to explore the best ways to maximize federal funding opportunities for early learning programs throughout their states. Options include using Medicaid financing for home visiting programs and initiating state applications for federal funding competitions.

12. Use Medicaid financing for home visiting

Home visiting programs have proven to be beneficial for parents and children,³² but funding for these programs is inadequate,³³ significantly limiting access.³⁴ Governors can identify strategies to leverage alternative sources of funding—such as Medicaid—to expand the reach of home visiting. Governors can convene a task force to conduct a feasibility study to identify what opportunities exist in their current Medicaid programs to support home visiting as well as how funding can be increased through expanding Medicaid coverage.



For example, **Minnesota** requires Medicaid managed care organizations to contract with public health agencies that provide home visiting services.³⁵



Governors should also direct Medicaid and home visiting administrators to explore the use of waivers to expand their home visiting programs. **South Carolina** recently launched a pay for success project that leverages Medicaid funds to expand its home visiting services. Following stakeholder engagement, the state designed a 1915(b) waiver that will mobilize \$13 million in Medicaid funds to expand the reach of the Nurse-Family Partnership program to an additional 3,200 families over a four-year period.³⁶

13. Initiate applications for federal funding competitions

Competitive grants from the federal government can provide funding to improve state early learning systems and to expand access. Governors can initiate applications and be supportive of state agencies in applying for and receiving these grants. By leading the charge on developing a vision and setting early learning priorities to which multiple stakeholders agree, governors can ensure that a state is primed and ready for funding competitions. They can also direct state agencies to review the requirements of previous grant opportunities and ensure that state agencies have up-to-date data on gaps in early learning and children's needs that are ready to be incorporated into an application. Governors can also be a strong advocate at the federal level for expansion of these grant opportunities.

For example, in 2014, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provided \$500 million to states to expand access to child care that meets the high-quality Early Head Start standards in low-income communities through Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership grants.³⁷ That same year, the U.S. Department of Education awarded Preschool Development Grants to 18 states to support implementing or expanding state preschool programs.³⁸ Both grants were awarded through a competitive process that required states to submit detailed applications, including comprehensive plans for the use of the additional funds and a demonstration of support from multiple stakeholders.³⁹

Use data more effectively

Governors should strive to use data more effectively. They should require data collaboration between agencies and utilize these data to map needs and tailor early learning services. They should also develop a centralized intake system to streamline program eligibility determinations and referrals.

14. Require interagency data collaboration and utilize the data to map needs and tailor services

Data collection is an important aspect in analyzing how and where early learning programs need to be expanded or where quality needs to be improved. Governors can direct state agencies to link data from early learning programs or to compile the data in one central repository. States can utilize these data to better map where children are located and where services are provided and to identify service deserts. By putting data from multiple programs in one place, state agencies, such as the departments of health and human service and education, can create a comprehensive picture of needs and gaps and can target supports appropriately.



In 2008, then-Gov. Deval Patrick (D) of **Massachusetts** issued an executive order establishing a Child and Youth Readiness Cabinet to ensure state agencies were aligned. As a result, the administration created the Early Childhood Information System to link child and program level data from all of its state agencies that serve children.⁴⁰ The system provides access to real time data—including program quality and child outcomes—to support data-driven decision-making, with a goal of helping reduce the state’s achievement gap.⁴¹

15. Develop a centralized intake system

Centralized intake systems aim to streamline program eligibility determinations and referrals to promote uninterrupted access to early learning programs. These systems can vary by state but typically include a process of identifying needed services and then making appropriate referrals. While some systems only connect families with early learning programs, others offer connection to a broader set of programs, including health and nutrition.⁴²



New Jersey currently operates centralized intake hubs in all of its counties that are designed to link pregnant women and young children with the resources and referrals they need. This centralization was a result of inter-agency collaboration across multiple state departments and has led to the development and implementation of a comprehensive prenatal to age 8 early learning plan.⁴³

Link providers to state early learning systems

Governors should link early learning providers to state early learning systems. They can do this by requiring all licensed providers to participate in their state QRIS and maximizing the effectiveness of state workforce registries.

16. Require all licensed providers to participate in the state QRIS

QRIS are a mechanism for assessing and supporting quality in early learning programs. If all providers participate in a QRIS, states can get a full picture of the quality of early learning programs across the state and can develop and target quality improvement supports as appropriate. To increase participation, governors can tie their state's QRIS to child care licensing, so that all licensed providers are required to participate. In these cases, the first tier of the QRIS is equivalent to licensing, and programs can choose whether to pursue a higher rating. By integrating licensing into QRIS, states automatically include licensed providers in the quality improvement system; states can then target supports more effectively.⁴⁴



In **North Carolina**, child care licensing has been tied to the state QRIS since 2000. All licensed providers are part of the QRIS, with a star one rating meaning that a program meets minimum licensing standards. Programs can voluntarily choose to meet higher standards for stars two to five. More than 95 percent of all programs in North Carolina are at the star two level or above, with more than 65 percent in the top two levels.⁴⁵

17. Maximize the effectiveness of workforce registries

The early childhood workforce is a critical component of high-quality early learning programs, but too often states lack effective policies to support them. A key step in addressing workforce issues is to fully understand the current early childhood workforce landscape. Many states utilize workforce registries, but most focus solely on tracking professional development.⁴⁶ To develop supportive policy solutions and targeted professional development supports, governors should direct state agencies to ensure that workforce registries collect comprehensive information—including demographics, educational background, employment history, and salary information⁴⁷—and require all early childhood workers to participate. States need to reduce barriers to participation and highlight the benefits of registries to the workforce. States should also ensure these registries are linked to other data systems, including child-level databases and the QRIS, to fully understand the links between the workforce, program quality, and child outcomes. Governors can assist in this effort by supporting the development of data sharing agreements across state agencies.



Enrollment in **Illinois'** early childhood workforce registry, Gateways to Opportunity, is required for all of the state's licensed providers. The registry connects educators with professional development advisers; presents a clear career ladder; outlines core job competencies and requirements; provides scholarship opportunities for furthering education; and rewards licensed practitioners with supplements for pursuing higher education opportunities. Illinois has seen significant increases in both the number of educators with credentials and the level of professional credentials that educators earn.⁴⁸ Moreover, in 2013, Illinois used its workforce registry data to inform credential requirements in its revamped QRIS.

Workforce surveys

While states should ultimately work to expand and develop a workforce registry, this is a long-term solution that can take time to implement. As an immediate step, states can consider conducting a workforce survey to collect data to inform policy. A workforce survey can be used to collect wage, demographic, and geographic data to assess the current landscape of the early childhood workforce.



In 2014, the **Indiana** Early Learning Advisory Committee commissioned a workforce study to collect data to inform early childhood workforce initiatives.⁴⁹

The workforce study found that earnings remain low, despite higher degree attainment, and that even though wages are tied to degree attainment, the early childhood workforce is paid less than comparably educated workers in other fields.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Governors can be champions in efforts to improve and expand early learning opportunities in their states. This brief lays out 17 direct actions that governors and state executive branches can take; it is important for states to focus on the actions that will best address their specific early learning challenges. Ultimately, a substantial investment of new funds will be required for the significant expansion of early learning programs necessary to meet the growing needs of American families. Governors should take the lead in making the case for increased investment at the state and federal levels in order to expand access to affordable high-quality early learning programs for all children.

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