



Strong Start for America's Children Act 2015 – Summary

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & THE WORKFORCE DEMOCRATS

DEMOCRATS.EDWORKFORCE.HOUSE.GOV

Hon. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott • Ranking Member

The Strong Start for America's Children Act is an innovative 10-year federal-state partnership to expand and improve early learning opportunities for children across the birth-to-age-five continuum. The bill would fund preschool for four-year old children from families earning below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), and encourage states to spend their own funds to support preschool for young children with family incomes above that income level. The legislation would also establish a new federal-state partnership with formula funding for four-year old preschool, with a state match, to all eligible states, based on each state's proportion of four-year olds under 200 percent of the FPL. States would provide sub-grants to high-quality, local providers, including local educational agencies (LEAs) and community-based providers—such as child care and Head Start programs—that have partnerships with LEAs. The bill also authorizes the new Early Head Start partnership with child care to improve the quality of care for infants and toddlers.

Title I – PREKINDERGARTEN ACCESS

- Establish a new federal-state partnership to provide access to high-quality prekindergarten programs for all low-income and moderate-income children to ensure kindergarten readiness.
- Increase access to appropriate supports for children with disabilities so they can fully participate in high-quality early education programs.

Key Definitions

- Eligible Local Entity – an LEA (including a charter school), a high-quality early childhood education program, or a consortium of such programs.
- High-Quality Prekindergarten Program
 - Serves children who turn 3 or 4 by the eligibility determination date (as used for school eligibility in the community in which the eligible entity is involved);
 - Requires high staff qualifications, including a bachelor's degree for teachers;
 - Evidence-based maximum class size and child-instructional staff ratio;
 - Maintains evidence-based health and safety standards;
 - Offers a full-day program;
 - Provides developmentally-appropriate, evidence-based curricular and learning environments aligned with the state's early learning standards;
 - Offers salaries comparable with K-12 teacher salaries;
 - Provides high-quality staff professional development;
 - Provides accessible comprehensive services, including health, mental health, dental, vision and hearing screenings, referrals and assistance in obtaining services (when appropriate), family engagement, family literacy, home visiting, nutrition and other support services as determined in a local needs analysis;
 - Provides ongoing program evaluation; and
 - Maintains disciplinary policies that exclude expulsion and extended suspension of participating children.

Allotments and Reservations

- Formula grants based on the number of four-year old children who come from families with incomes at 200 percent of FPL or below
- .5 percent to the Secretary of the Interior for the areas served by the Bureau of Indian Affairs
- .5 percent to the territories and outlying areas
- 1 percent or \$30 million for federal technical assistance, evaluation and administration

Matching Requirements

- Over 10 years, the match is an increasing state contribution, from 10 percent of the federal amount in the first year to an equal share of the federal amount by the eighth year.
- A reduced match rate would be available for states serving preschool to half or more of eligible four-year olds.
- Supplanting is prohibited; Maintenance of Effort is required.

Prekindergarten Development Grants

- The bill establishes grants for states not receiving prekindergarten formula grants and local entities. These development grants would be used to help states or local entities increase their capacity for high-quality prekindergarten programs. States could use funding to improve the quality of their current prekindergarten programs or to establish prekindergarten programs if they do not currently support any.
- States would be required to provide a 20 percent match for the grant.
- States would be able to sub-grant to early childhood education programs and local school districts to improve the quality of prekindergarten programs in the state.

State Eligibility Criteria

- Have established, or will establish, early learning standards aligned with its K-12 system that are developmentally-appropriate, and culturally and linguistically appropriate and address all domains of school readiness, including physical well-being, motor development, social-emotional development, literacy and language development, approaches to learning, cognition/general knowledge, and early math and scientific development;
- Have the ability, or will develop the ability, to link preschool data link into its K-12 system for children in federally-funded early childhood education programs;
- Have established a State Early Childhood Education and Care Council; and
- Provide state-funded kindergarten

State Applications

State Assurances:

- Coordinate with and continue to participate in specific federally-funded early childhood programs: the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), and the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) programs
- Administering state agency coordinates with the State Educational Agency (SEA), if it isn't the SEA
- Establishment of high-quality state prekindergarten standards

States Must Describe Plans to:

- Serve high-quality preschool to all four-year olds in the state with family incomes below 200 percent of the FPL, and after achieving that, serve three-year olds;
- Monitor programs and evaluate program outcomes understandable to parents;
- Expand services to children in families earning above 200 percent of the FPL;
- Establish an age-appropriate early learning assessment program;
- Implement program measures and targets, and establish accountability for local eligible entities' use of funds;
- Support the acquisition of teacher credentials in early childhood, or a closely related field, and ensure institutions of higher education support this effort;
- Coordinate local activities with existing federally-funded programs, including Head Start; the Social Services Block Grant; IDEA; CCDBG; MIECHV; Temporary Assistance to Needy Families grants; early literacy programs; Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships; Preschool Development Grant-funded programs; and Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge;
- Coordinate state activities with related programs funded by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, IDEA, Head Start, CCDBG, and the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act;
- Encourage coordination with community-based learning resources (libraries, museums, parks and rec);
- Address needs of Dual Language Learners;
- Integrate state early learning standards into the prekindergarten program;

- Provide supports for workforce development supports for existing and new providers;
- Provide sufficient facilities;
- Support collaboration between community-based providers and local educational agencies (LEAs);
- Increase the number of children in high-quality kindergarten, including the children served by this prekindergarten program;
- Encourage or promote socioeconomic, racial and ethnic diversity in classrooms, as applicable; and
- Ensure comprehensive criminal history background checks for employees and applicants for positions with unsupervised access to children.

Eligible Local Entity Applications

Must Describe Plans for the Following:

- Comprehensive parent and family engagement policies;
- Coordination with Head Start, CCDBG, IDEA and other early childhood education programs;
- Joint staff training with school staff;
- Comprehensive transition-to-kindergarten policies;
- Address particular needs of homeless children, English language learners, children with disabilities, children in foster care, and free and reduced price lunch eligible children;
- Ensure program access and provider support for homeless children and migrant children;
- Carrying out a community needs assessment to identify any additional on-site, local comprehensive services; and
- Supports for workforce to gain relevant credentials, and professional development for general early childhood skills and working with special populations.
- For use of sub-grants, a local entity must have strong partnerships with an LEA; if the sub-grantee is an LEA, it must have a strong partnership with community-based early childhood education providers.

State Use of Funds

- States may set-aside 20 percent of its formula funding in the first four years of implementation to increase quality, particularly for workforce supports and professional development;
- States may serve four-year olds below 200 percent of the FPL in a state, and if a state achieves universal, sustained access to prekindergarten for four-year olds, it may begin providing sub-grants to serve three-year olds below 200 percent of FPL; if a locality provides universal access to its four-year olds a state may begin providing sub-grants to serve three-year olds in that locality as long as it does not diminish access to four-year olds in other parts of the state;
- States may set-aside 15 percent for high-quality early childhood education and care for infants/toddlers.
 - The Secretary of Education would be responsible for disbursement of funds
 - The Secretaries of Education and Health and Human Services would determine the most appropriate means of administering these programs for infants and toddlers.

Head Start

- HHS would develop a process to convert Head Start programs from serving four-year olds to serving three-year olds and infants/toddlers in Early Head Start programs, and report to Congress.

Performance Measures and Targets

- Increasing school readiness;
- Narrowing school readiness gaps;
- Reducing special education placements;
- Reducing the need for grade retention;
- Increasing the number of high-quality programs and children in those programs
- Preventing chronic absences, as applicable; and
- Providing high-quality nutrition and physical activity services

- States are prohibited from using the funds to use a single assessment as the primary or sole method for assessing program effectiveness; or to reward or sanction children or teachers

Reports

- Annual state reports to ED and HHS on how funds are being used and progress toward outcomes and coverage;
- Data on the operational weekly number each local entity provides in each LEA;
- Number and percentage of children in high-quality prekindergarten and kindergarten programs by race, income, age, disability, English language learner, homelessness, full-day programs and cost to families;
- Data on availability, affordability and quality of infant and toddler care;
- Information on the percentage of sub-grant costs funded by the federal, state and local sources by program; and
- Information on suspensions and expulsions of participating children, disaggregated by race, ethnicity, family income, age, and disability, policies to promote alternatives, and efforts to provide educational opportunities for children who are suspended or expelled.
- ED would compile and summarize state reports and submit to Congress annually.

Title II – EARLY HEAD START – CHILD CARE PARTNERSHIPS

- Establishes Early Head Start – child care partnerships to help child care centers and family child care homes improve their quality of coordinated, comprehensive services for infants and toddlers and children through age three, particularly to support providers gaining relevant credentials and help programs blend funds to create a full day of services.
- Provides competitive grants to Early Head Start agencies in partnership with a child care center or home to help them meet Early Head Start performance standards. Allocates funds to states based on the number of young children with family incomes below the FPL; reserves three percent for Indian Head Start programs and 4.5 percent for migrant and seasonal Head Start programs.

Title III – AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

- Increases the FY 2016 authorization of appropriations for Part B, Section 619 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for preschool for children with disabilities from age 3 to 5 by \$65 million for a total of \$418 million.
- Increases the FY 2016 authorization of appropriations for Part C of IDEA for early childhood intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities by \$70 million for a total of \$508 million.

Title IV – MATERNAL, INFANT, AND EARLY CHILDHOOD HOME VISITING PROGRAM

- Expresses a “sense of the House” that Congress should continue to fund evidence-based, voluntary home visitation programs under MIECHV to promote maternal and child health, improve school readiness, prevent child abuse and neglect, support family economic self-sufficiency, reduce crime and delinquency, and improve community resources.