

Summary of Early Learning Challenge Fund (H.R. 3221)

Representative George Miller (D-CA), the Chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, introduced a bill on July 15 that would establish an Early Learning Challenge Fund to incentivize states to establish systems for improving the quality of early learning settings for children ages birth to five and increase disadvantaged children's access to high-quality early learning programs. This initiative, which is proposed as part of The Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2009 (H.R. 3221)

(<http://edlabor.house.gov/documents/111/pdf/legislation/StudentAidandFiscalResponsibilityAct.pdf>), was developed in collaboration with the Obama Administration. The legislation would provide \$1 billion a year for 8 years for the Early Learning Challenge Fund using savings obtained through streamlining the federal student loan program. The Student Aid Act was passed by the House on September 17.

Competitive Grants

The Fund would establish two types of competitive grants:

- *Quality Pathways Grants* would be available to states that already have made significant progress toward establishing systems for improving the quality of early learning settings. These grants would be awarded for five years and would be renewable based on a state's progress in increasing the number of disadvantaged children who participate in high-quality early learning programs, implementing an early learning system that meets components in the bill, and incorporating program quality findings and recommendations reported by a national Commission. In the first year, up to 65 percent of funds would be used for these grants, with that percentage increasing to 85 percent by the fourth year. The size of the grants would be determined by the total number of states with approved applications and the number of low-income children under age five in each state with an approved application.
- *Development Grants* would be available to states with some elements of an early learning system to support planning efforts. These grants would be awarded for three years and would not be renewable, with the expectation that after three years, developing states would have made enough progress to apply for a Quality Pathways Grants.

States may designate a state-level entity to administer the grant.

Proposed activities must be coordinated with the State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care, and where applicable, the application should incorporate plans and recommendations from the Council.

Priority for Grants

Priority will be given to states:

- Whose applications contain assurances that the state will use, in part, funds reserved for quality activities from the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) for proposed activities; and
- That demonstrate efforts to build public-private partnerships.

Limitations on Use of Assessment

Funds may not be used for assessments that provide rewards or sanctions for individual children or teachers, or a single assessment used as the primary or sole method for assessing program effectiveness.

Assessments can only be used to evaluate children in order to improve instruction or classroom environment; target professional development; determine the need for health, mental health, disability, or family support services; inform the quality improvement process at the state level; program evaluation for the purposes of program improvement and parent information; or research conducted as part of the required national evaluation.

State Match and Maintenance Effort

States must provide a 10 percent match in the first two fiscal years of the grant, 15 percent in the third fiscal year, and 20 percent in the fourth and subsequent fiscal years. Public-private partnerships to increase the number of low-income children in high-quality early learning programs may be used towards the match. The Secretary may waive or reduce the match if the state demonstrates a need for a waiver or reduction due to extreme financial hardship.

States that receive grants must ensure that the aggregate expenditures by the state and its political subdivisions on early learning programs and services are not less than the level of the expenditures for these programs and services for fiscal year 2006.

Elements of State Applications

Applications must include:

- A description of how the state will implement quality initiatives to improve early learning programs serving disadvantaged children from birth to age five to lead to a greater percentage of these children participating in higher-quality early learning programs.
- A description of the goals and benchmarks for increasing the number or percentage of disadvantaged children in high-quality settings to improve school readiness outcomes,

including an established baseline of the number of disadvantaged children in high-quality early learning programs.

- A description of how the state will implement a governance structure and a system of early learning programs and services that includes the following components:
 - State early learning standards that address children’s cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development domains, and approaches to learning that are developmentally appropriate for all children and that are aligned with academic content standards for kindergarten through third grade.
 - A process to ensure that state early learning and development standards are integrated into the instructional and programmatic practices of early learning programs and services, including services provided to children under section 619 and part C of IDEA.
 - A system for rating program quality that builds on licensing requirements and other state regulatory standards and that:
 - Is designed to improve quality and effectiveness across different types of early learning settings.
 - Integrates evidence-based program quality standards that reflect standard levels of quality and has progressively higher levels of program quality.
 - Integrates the state’s early learning and development standards for the purpose of improving instructional and programmatic practices.
 - Addresses staff qualifications and professional development.
 - Provides financial incentives and other supports to help programs meet and sustain higher levels of quality.
 - Includes mechanisms for evaluating how programs are meeting those standards and progressively higher levels of quality.
 - Includes a mechanism for public awareness of program levels.
 - A system of program review and monitoring that is designed to rate providers and to assess and improve programmatic practices, instructional practices, and classroom environment.
 - A process to support early learning programs integrating instructional and programmatic practices that:
 - Include developmentally appropriate, ongoing, classroom-based instructional assessments for each domain of child development and learning to guide and improve instructional practice, professional development of staff, and services.
 - Are aligned with the curricula used in the early learning program and with the state early learning and development standards or the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework (as described in the Head Start Act), as applicable.
 - Minimum preservice early childhood development and education training requirements for providers in early learning programs.
 - A comprehensive plan for supporting the professional preparation and the ongoing professional development of an effective, well-compensated early learning workforce, which plan includes training and education that is sustained,

- intensive, and classroom-focused and leads toward a credential or degree and is tied to improved compensation.
- An outreach strategy to promote understanding by parents and families of their child's early development and learning, the state's program rating system and the rating of the program in which their child is enrolled.
- A coordinated system to facilitate screening, referral, and provision of services related to health, dental, developmental delay, mental health, disability, and family support for children participating in early learning programs.
- A process for evaluating school readiness in children that reflects all of the major domains of development, and that is used to guide practice and improve early learning programs.
- A coordinated data infrastructure that facilitates
 - Uniform data collection about the quality of early learning programs, essential information about the children and families that participate in such programs, and the qualifications and compensation of the early learning workforce in such programs.
 - Alignment and interoperability between the data system for early learning programs for children and data systems for elementary and secondary education.
- A description of how the funds provided under the grant will be targeted to prioritize increasing the number and percentage of low-income children in high-quality early learning programs, including children
 - In each age group (infants, toddlers, and preschoolers).
 - With developmental delays and disabilities.
 - With limited English proficiency.
 - Living in rural areas
- An assurance that the grant will be used to improve the quality of early learning programs across a range of types of settings and providers of such programs.
- A description of the steps the state will take to encourage center-based child care programs, family child care programs, state-funded prekindergarten, Head Start programs, and other early learning programs, such as those funded under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 or section 619 of the IDEA to participate in the state program rating system.
- An assurance that the grant will be used only to supplement, and not to supplant, federal, state, and local funds otherwise available to support existing early learning programs and services.
- A description of any disparity by age group (infants, toddlers, and preschoolers) of available high-quality early learning programs in low-income communities and the steps the state will take to decrease such disparity, if applicable.

- A description of how the state will implement a process for improving the quality of early learning services to better meet the needs of children who have experienced abuse or neglect, been exposed to violence, toxic stress, parental substance abuse, mental illness, or homelessness, or have had early behavioral and peer relationship problems, including addressing appropriate professional development, programmatic practices, classroom environment, and outreach and support to meet the needs of such children.
- A description of how the state early learning and development standards will be appropriate for children who are limited English proficient.
- A description of how the state will coordinate the purposes of this title with the activities funded under
 - Section 658G of the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 1990 (Quality Activities)
 - Section 619 and part C of the IDEA
 - Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965
 - State-funded pre-kindergarten programs (where applicable)
 - Head Start programs
 - Other early childhood programs and services.
- A description of how the state will use the grant to increase the number of disadvantaged children in high-quality early learning settings proportionally across infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.
- An assurance that the state will continue to participate in part C of the IDEA for the duration of the grant.

Use of Grant Funds

Not less than 65 percent of the grant shall be used to implement quality initiatives that increase the number of disadvantaged children in high-quality early learning programs. Funds shall be used for two or more for the following activities:

- Improving the credentials and compensation of the early learning providers and are tied to compensation.
- Helping early learning programs meet and sustain higher program quality standards, such as
 - Improving teacher-child ratios.
 - Improving group size.
 - Improving the qualifications of early learning providers.
 - Supporting effective education and training for early learning providers.

- Implementing classroom observation assessments and data-driven decisions tied to activities that improve instructional practices, programmatic practices, or classroom environment and promote school readiness.
- Providing financial incentives to early learning programs for undertaking and/or maintaining quality improvements that promote healthy development and school readiness.
- Integrating state early learning and development standards into instructional and programmatic practices in early learning programs.
- Providing high-quality, sustained, intensive, and classroom-focused professional development that improves the knowledge and skills of early learning providers.
- Building the capacity of early learning programs and communities to promote parents' understanding of the state's early learning system and the rating of the programs in which their child is enrolled and encourage the active involvement and engagement of parents and families in the learning and development of their children.
- Building the capacity of early learning programs and communities to facilitate screening, referral, and provision of services related to health, dental, developmental delay, mental health, disability, and family support for children participating in early learning programs.
- Other innovative activities proposed by the state and approved in advance by the Secretary that are based on successful practices and designed to improve the quality of early learning programs and services.

The remainder of the grant amount may be used for one of the following:

- Implementation or enhancement of the state's data system, including interoperability across agencies serving children, and unique child and program identifiers.
- Enhancement of the state's oversight system for early learning programs, including the implementation of a quality rating system.
- The development and implementation of measures of school readiness of children that reflect all of the major domains of child development and that inform the quality improvement process.

Once states have made sufficient progress in implementing the provisions of the grant, they can apply to the Secretary for permission to use up to 25 percent of their funds to increase disadvantage children's access to high-quality programs that offer full-day services if they provide a 20 percent match (unless they can demonstrate financial hardship).

If the Secretary determines that a state is encountering barriers to reaching its goals, they must develop an improvement plan in consultation with the Secretary.

National Commission on Standards

A National Commission is established to review the status of state and federal early learning program quality standards and early learning and development standards and recommend benchmarks for program quality standards and early learning and development standards. The bill reserves 3 percent of funds to support the National Commission and for additional research.

Reports

Each state that receives a grant under this title shall submit to the Secretary an annual report that includes information on the activities carried out by the state. In addition, for each year in which funding is provided under this title, the Secretary shall submit an annual report to the Congress on the activities carried out.