

## PROMOTING STATE INITIATIVES TO EXPAND ACCESS TO EARLY HEAD START

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*Much of this article is excerpted from [Building on the Promise: State Initiatives to Expand Access to Early Head Start for Young Children and their Families](#), a joint publication of the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) and ZERO TO THREE.*

### Introduction

Babies need good health, strong families, and positive early learning experiences to promote their healthy intellectual, social, and emotional development. However, as the poverty rate for children under age 3 continues to increase, a rising number of young children are going without these supports.<sup>1</sup> Growing up in poverty can threaten healthy brain development by increasing the likelihood that children will be exposed to inadequate nutrition, substance abuse, maternal depression, unsafe environments, abuse, or poor quality daily care.<sup>2</sup> Reaching highly vulnerable children at birth, or even reaching their mothers during pregnancy, is critical.<sup>3</sup>

The federal Early Head Start program was created to help minimize the disparities caused by poverty by supporting the healthy development of pregnant women and low-income infants and toddlers in the context of their families and communities. Research has shown that Early Head Start positively impacts children's cognitive, language, and social-emotional development; parents' progress toward self-sufficiency; as well as a wide range of parenting outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, federal funds reach less than 3 percent of all eligible children.<sup>5</sup>

Through interviews with state administrators, CLASP and ZERO TO THREE found 20 states that have taken action to expand and enhance Early Head Start services for infants, toddlers, and their families. *Building on the Promise* is an in-depth study conducted in 2007 of these state efforts, including an analysis of the lessons learned from state experiences and recommendations to help other states expand the reach of Early Head Start. This article summarizes the different state approaches to expand Early Head Start, the opportunities and challenges facing state policymakers, and recommendations for states detailed in *Building on the Promise*, as well as outlines ways that infant-toddler professionals can use *Building on the Promise* to promote policies to expand access to Early Head Start in their state.

### State Early Head Start Initiatives: Approaches

Although each approach builds on the strengths of Early Head Start, the details of state initiatives vary widely in scope. There were four main approaches taken by states, with some states reporting multiple approaches:

- ***Extend the day or year of existing Early Head Start services.*** The most common approach is to help extend the day or year of Early Head Start services by making additional funding available (often from the child care subsidy system) or through policies to ease the process of blending funding. Twelve states report using this

approach: California, District of Columbia, Idaho, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Vermont.

- ***Expand the capacity of existing Early Head Start and Head Start programs to increase the number of children and pregnant women served.*** Ten states (Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin) expand the capacity of existing federal Head Start or Early Head Start grantees to serve more infants and toddlers and three states (Iowa, Kansas and Minnesota) serve expecting mothers. States do so either by providing grants to these programs for this purpose or by allowing state supplemental funding for Head Start programs to include Early Head Start services.
- ***Provide resources and assistance to child care providers to help them deliver services meeting Early Head Start standards.*** Initiatives in Illinois and Oklahoma leverage new funds and supports to help child care providers to implement most Early Head Start standards.
- ***Support partnerships between Early Head Start and center-based and family child care providers to improve the quality of care.*** Five states provide funding for Early Head Start - child care partnerships, but use very different approaches. An Iowa pilot creates partnerships between Early Head Start and family child care and family, friend, and neighbor care settings, and requires that Early Head Start programs implement the home-based model with children in those settings. Kansas and Maryland facilitate Early Head Start - child care partnerships to actually deliver Early Head Start in child care settings. Nebraska uses the partnerships to leverage federal expertise and resources to improve quality of child care partners.

Lastly, New York uses a unique approach using the model of Early Head Start comprehensive services to develop regional collaboratives to help more vulnerable young children and their families have access to a similar range of services even when not enrolled in Early Head Start.

### **Opportunities and Challenges Facing State Policymakers**

Even with the great variation among state policies, the lessons from state administrators shared a number of common themes. The following opportunities and challenges emerged:

#### *Opportunities:*

- Early Head Start is a research-based model and a resource for states wanting to improve care for vulnerable infants and toddlers and be responsive to community needs.
- States can expand access to Early Head Start services provided by federal Early Head Start/Head Start grantees and improve the quality of community-based child care settings.
- The federal resources dedicated to high quality implementation of Early Head Start can be leveraged by state policymakers to improve the quality of existing child care programs.

#### *Challenges:*

- Stagnant federal funding for Early Head Start and the Child Care and Development Block Grant negatively impacts the ability of states to build on the promise of Early Head Start and partner with child care.

- Inability to attract and retain well-educated teachers with infant and toddler expertise challenges Early Head Start expansion.
- A significant upfront investment in training and technical assistance on the Early Head Start approach and meeting federal Head Start Program Performance Standards is critical to implementation when creating new program slots.
- States are tapping federal funding sources tied to parental work status—Child Care and Development Block Grant or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families funds—but are confused by and struggle with requirements that seem to conflict with the Early Head Start model.
- Implementing a comprehensive state Early Head Start initiative that builds the quality of existing child care programs requires cross-state agency and state-federal collaboration.
- How state policymakers develop and sustain support for state investment in Early Head Start varies, but in many cases their initiatives are not well known or very large. More needs to be done to build support and funding for these initiatives.

### **Recommendations for States**

Given the promise of Early Head Start and the limited access to the program under current funding levels, state leaders interested in promoting better futures for very young at-risk children should review the approaches described in *Building on the Promise*, and take appropriate action. Based on comments by the state policymakers interviewed, CLASP and ZERO TO THREE make the following specific recommendations to state leaders interested in building on the promise of Early Head Start in their states:

- ***Provide sufficient state funding to the Early Head Start initiative and participating providers to ensure stable resources and to attract and retain high quality staff.*** State policymakers acknowledge that the Early Head Start model costs more per child than the level set for basic child care subsidies. However, they argue that given the promising research on well-implemented Early Head Start programs, this level of service is critical to help improve the odds for vulnerable young children and families in their states. States should consider carefully the funding sources they use for Early Head Start, and educate themselves on how flexible their use of CCDBG and TANF funds may be under federal program guidance, remaining true to the Early Head Start model of continuous, comprehensive, child-centered services.
- ***Use Early Head Start initiatives not only to build on federal Early Head Start capacity, but also to partner with and enhance the quality of child care already serving infants and toddlers in the state.*** States said that working with child care as partners or providers of Early Head Start builds on the state investment in child care, can improve continuity of care for working families, and leverages state and federal investments in child care. States also pointed out that the state initiatives can enhance the services federal Early Head Start grantees provide.
- ***Build in sufficient training, technical assistance, and monitoring to ensure that all participating programs meet the educational, family support, and health and nutrition components of the federal Head Start Program Performance Standards.*** Many states said it is critical to have funds set aside to ensure program quality and model fidelity by

helping states get up to speed on the Early Head Start Performance Standards and to create an infrastructure for training, technical assistance, and professional development; especially for providers who are new to the Early Head Start program model.

- ***Cultivate champions for Early Head Start and the needs of vulnerable infants and toddlers, inside and outside state government.*** Several states reported that a key component in implementing a state Early Head Start program is cultivating champions—across state agencies, parents, legislators, providers, and business leaders.
- ***Ensure that data collection and evaluation are built into state policies to better help programs provide high quality early childhood services, meet the Head Start Program Performance Standards, and ensure children benefit from initiatives.*** States reported using a variety of tools to collect regular program data to monitor what services programs were delivering and understand the population being served, often drawing on federal resources and agencies to do so. Only a few states have put resources forth to conduct evaluations, and most of the results are not yet complete.

With the late 2007 passage of Head Start reauthorization legislation, it is also important that ***states monitor new opportunities to build on the federal Early Head Start program***, including: whether there are increases in federal funding (half of which has been set aside for Early Head Start); if there are ways to coordinate state efforts with new requirements to improve Early Head Start quality and teacher qualifications; and if there are ways to assist Head Start preschool programs in the state that wish to convert to serve more infants and toddlers.

### **Advocating for Expansion of Early Head Start in your State**

As infant-toddler professionals, you have a very important role to play in promoting policies and initiatives to build on Early Head Start in your state. Whether or not your state is currently investing in an Early Head Start initiative, it is critical that policymakers and state administrators understand the effectiveness of Early Head Start and how other states are innovatively expanding these services.

To get involved in advocating for Early Head Start in your state, use the research and recommendations in ***Building on the Promise*** to:

1. **Meet with state administrators.** Meeting with state agency employees is a great way to learn more about your state's approach to providing comprehensive services for infants, toddlers and their families. If your state currently has an Early Head Start initiative, use the recommendations from ***Building on the Promise*** to discuss ways to strengthen and expand these initiatives. If your state does not currently have an Early Head Start initiative, be sure to discuss the promise of the federal program and the different approaches other states are currently using to expand upon it.

Most state Early Head Start initiatives are administered by the state Department of Education or the Department of Health and Human Services, but this will vary state to state. To find contact information for agencies dealing with early childhood issues in your state, visit your state's website. Most state websites follow the same format: [www.STATENAME.gov](http://www.STATENAME.gov) or

[www.STATEABBREVIATION.gov](http://www.STATEABBREVIATION.gov). For example, you would visit [www.vermont.gov](http://www.vermont.gov) or [www.ny.gov](http://www.ny.gov).

2. **Meet with your governor's office.** The impetus to begin many of the current state Early Head Start initiatives originated in the governor's office. Since a state's budget is originally proposed by the governor, governors and their staff play a key role in starting and funding state initiatives. By meeting with the staff in your governor's office, you can educate them on the value of investing in the Early Head Start program at the state level.

To find information about your governor's office, visit the [Governors' Staff Directory](#) on the National Governors Association (NGA) website. The website provides contact information for key staff members, such as the media contacts, Policy Directors, and Chiefs of Staff.

3. **Meet with your state legislators and their staff.** Several states administrators interviewed for *Building on the Promise* reported that cultivating champions in the state legislature is a key component to implementing an Early Head Start initiative. Fostering relationships with state legislators and their staff is critical to securing funding during the budget process for the state Early Head Start initiatives. Additionally, in some states, Early Head Start initiatives were started due primarily to legislative decisions.

To find your state legislature's website, visit the [National Conference of State Legislatures' \(NCSL\) database](#). On your state legislature's website, you'll be able to find a listing of your legislators' contact information, and a legislative calendar with important deadlines.

4. **Get involved with other early childhood advocates in your state.** Support from other early childhood advocates in your state is also critical to implementing state Early Head Start initiatives. Several states interviewed in *Building on the Promise* reported that strong support from the state advocacy community, including parents, was very important to securing funding for the initiatives each year.

To find the child advocacy organization in your state, visit the [Voices for America's Children](#) website and click on the map of the United States. Some states also have coalition's working specifically on infant-toddler issues. Talk to your colleagues and other infant-toddler professionals to find out more specific information for your state!

## Conclusion

Vulnerable babies and toddlers need good health, strong families, and positive early learning experiences to promote healthy intellectual, social, and emotional development, but many grow up without these supports. The federal Early Head Start program provides the comprehensive services needed to support the healthy development of pregnant women and low-income infants and toddlers. However, less than 3 percent of all children who are federally eligible for Early Head Start are being served. Using the research and recommendations in *Building on the Promise*, infant-toddler professionals should encourage their state leaders to take action now to bring Early Head Start services to more young children and families in their state.

**Authors:**

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<sup>1</sup> National Center for Children in Poverty, *Basic Facts about Low-Income Children: Birth to Age Three*, 2006. [http://www.nccp.org/pub\\_ecp06b.html](http://www.nccp.org/pub_ecp06b.html).

<sup>2</sup> National Center for Children in Poverty, *Poverty and Brain Development in Early Childhood*, 1999. [http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text\\_398.pdf](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_398.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, *A Science-Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy: Using Evidence to Improve Outcomes in Learning, Behavior, and Health for Vulnerable Children*, 2007. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, & Evaluation, *Making a Difference in the Lives of Infants and Toddlers and Their Families: The Impacts of Early Head Start*, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> ZERO TO THREE calculations based on data from the U.S. Office of Head Start on number of enrolled preschoolers and Census Bureau data on children in poverty by single year of age in 2004.