

The Road to High-Quality Early Learning: Lessons from the States

Marjorie Wechsler, David Kirp, Titilayo Tinubu Ali, Madelyn Gardner, Anna Maier, Hanna Melnick, and Patrick M. Shields

Overview

Early education has emerged as a critical issue for state policymakers, who invested nearly \$7 billion in programs for our country's youngest learners during the 2015–16 fiscal year alone. In all, 45 states and the District of Columbia took action, with 32 states boosting their funding from the previous year.¹ *The Road to High-Quality Early Learning: Lessons from the States* provides a much-needed review and analysis of how states can design, fund, and manage investments to assure high-quality preschool. In analyzing how four states—Michigan, West Virginia, Washington, and North Carolina—have built quality early education systems with strong outcomes, the Learning Policy Institute has identified lessons for policymakers nationwide who are committed to providing high-quality preschool for all.

Lessons Learned

1) Prioritize Quality and Continuous Improvement

Each of the states has invested in strategies to improve the quality of their early education programs. Key lessons include:

- Define and use state quality standards that incorporate assessments of adult-child interactions, as well as structural factors, such as adult-child ratios and facility requirements.
- Develop quality rating and improvement systems to support continuous improvement, reinforce quality standards, and provide a basis for program accountability.
- Link funding to ratings as a tool for promoting quality.
- Develop a strong local infrastructure to meet the needs of diverse communities.

2) Invest in Training and Coaching

These four states place heavy emphasis on boosting the quality of preschool teachers, focusing both on their credentials and their interactions with students. Key lessons include:

- Invest in strengthening teacher quality by providing specialized training.
- Make training programs accessible to providers by offering courses regionally and online.
- Encourage teacher advancement and retention through scholarships and salary supplements.
- Provide coaching to improve program quality.

The States

Michigan offers high-quality prekindergarten that is targeted for low-income children. It has restructured program administration to facilitate coordination across the early care and education system and made program-improvement strategies routine.

West Virginia makes preschool available to all 4-year-olds, paying for the program with general school aid dollars. It offers communities considerable autonomy in program design and evaluation, and requires collaboration across private providers, schools, and Head Start.

Washington follows the Head Start model, offering a range of wraparound services to the state's most vulnerable students. Through intensive coaching and rigorous standards, the state is improving home-based child care as a way to expand access to quality early education programs.

North Carolina offers a “one-stop shop” at the local level, offering an array of birth-to-five services for low-income families. The state pioneered the development of a quality rating system and supports teachers to build their skills through training and salary supplements.

The full report can be found at <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/our-work/publications-resources/the-road-to-high-quality-early-education-lessons-from-the-states>.

3) Coordinate the Administration of Birth-Through-Grade-3 Programs

These four states are seeking to create a seamless educational experience for youngsters, aligning what is taught and how it is taught from preschool through elementary school. Key lessons include:

- House all children’s services under one umbrella or create a cabinet-level department that works across agencies.
- Improve coordination across programs and systems by sharing data and aligning curriculum and assessments.



4) Strategically Combine Multiple Funding Sources to Increase Access and Improve Quality

While these four states primarily depend on state dollars as the main revenue source for early education, they also take advantage of federal and local funding. Key lessons include:

- Fund early education programs with dedicated state dollars combined, or braided, with funding from Head Start and other federal programs (e.g., Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Early Head Start) to make the most efficient use of available resources and to expand access and quality.
- Leverage short-term funds and public-private partnerships.

5) Create Broad-Based Coalitions and Support

Launching a high-quality early education initiative—or building a bigger and better program—is hard work. These four states relied on broad-based support to advance their efforts. Key lessons include:

- Bring together advocates, politicians, philanthropists, practitioners, and business leaders, working closely with policymakers, to promote high-quality, accessible early education.
- Offer parents a choice of providers.
- Cultivate champions.

1. Education Commission of the States (2016). *State pre-k funding for 2015–16 fiscal year: National trends in state preschool funding*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States.

About the Learning Policy Institute

The Learning Policy Institute conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Working with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others, the Institute seeks to advance evidence-based policies that support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Institute connects policymakers and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels with the evidence, ideas, and actions needed to strengthen the education system from preschool through college and career readiness.