



SREB

Building a Strong Foundation

State Policy for Early Childhood Education

The path to success in school and life begins long before a child enters the classroom. In the critical first few years, family, community and school play significant roles in shaping a child's route to health and educational achievement.

What we invest now in young children can bring the biggest payoffs as states aim to increase high school graduation rates, college attainment, workforce readiness and quality of life. Policymakers with foresight can bring home long-term social and economic returns to their states.

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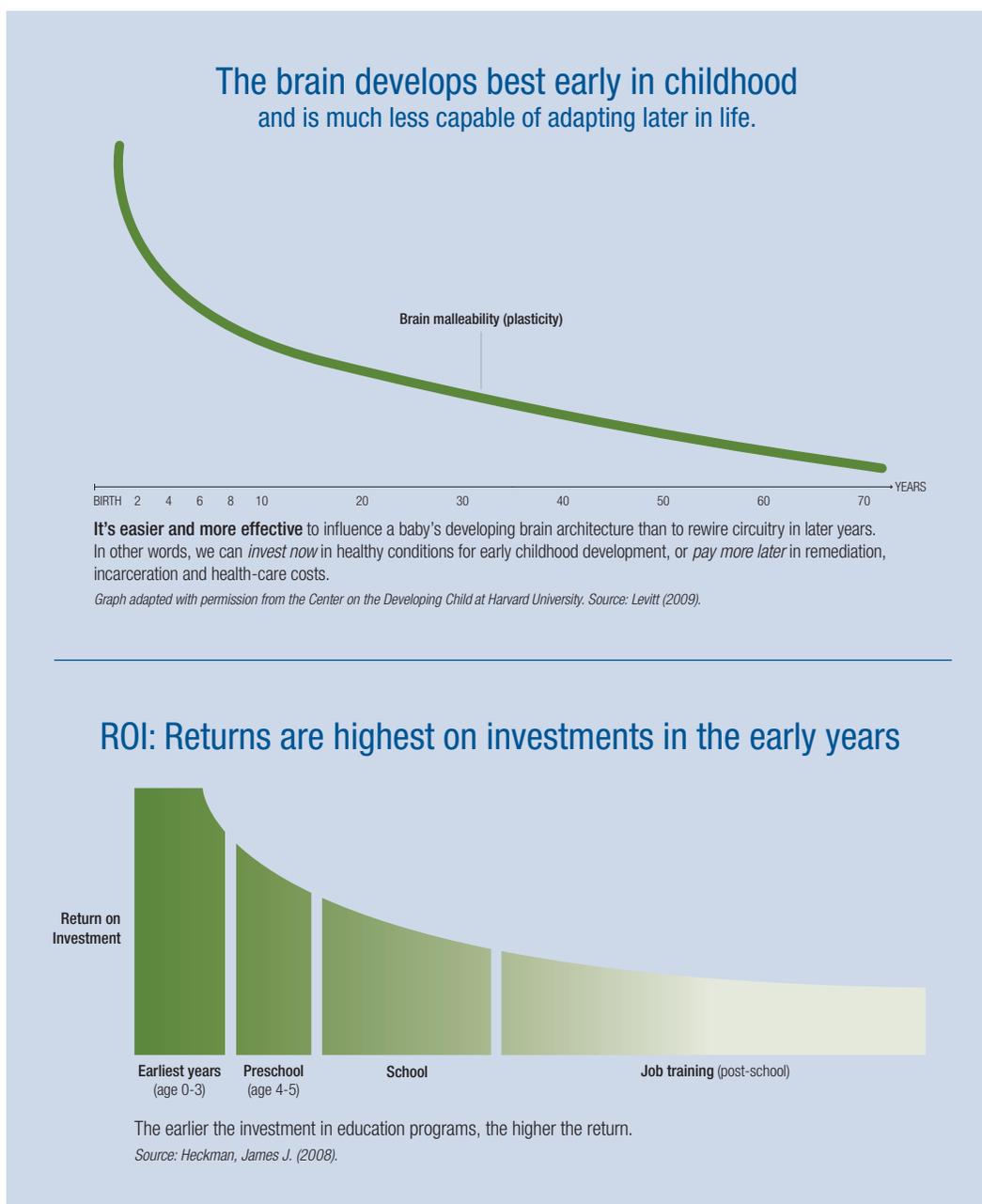
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Recommendations of the SREB Early Childhood Commission

A Foundation to Grow on

What we know today about how young children learn is compelling evidence for making early childhood development a priority in our states. It's time to build on what we've learned, to implement high-quality programs on a large scale, connecting many more children and families to the kinds of programs that work.

The payoff is a few years ahead — in an educated citizenry, healthier adults and a productive workforce. Investing early in our youngest lays a sturdy foundation for all of our investments in education. The sooner the better for a strong start in school and in life.



SREB Early Childhood Commission Recommendations



All the pieces matter for strong state policy in early childhood education.

To build a sound educational foundation for all children, state policy should center on high-quality programs with great teachers. Policy also should address governance, accountability and access.

Program Quality

Recommendation 1 — *Provide incentives to improve quality in early childhood development programs.*

States should:

- 1.1 Develop and regularly update: standards for programs for children from birth to third grade; learning guidelines for children; and practice standards for teachers and classrooms.
- 1.2 Align quality standards for early childhood programs to each other and to K-12 programs, with special attention to aligning standards from pre-K to third grade.
- 1.3 Coordinate funding streams across public and private settings to achieve efficient use of resources and promote high-quality programs for children and families.
- 1.4 Promote effective, evidence-based and developmentally appropriate curricula in early childhood programs.
- 1.5 Establish systematic quality improvement initiatives, such as quality rating systems for child development programs, as well as incentives that reward and improve performance.

Teacher Quality

Recommendation 2 — *Develop and sustain a high-quality early childhood program workforce that has the competencies to foster the social, emotional and cognitive development of young children.*

States should:

- 2.1. Ensure that pre-service early childhood practitioner-training programs at postsecondary institutions provide opportunities for future teachers to develop the specialized competencies they will need to work effectively with young children.
- 2.2 Regularly review, and improve as needed, licensing and professional development requirements for practitioners, to ensure that workforce standards are continuously realigned with program standards.
- 2.3 Ensure that practitioners in early childhood programs have access to high-quality and affordable professional development and that high-impact strategies such as coaching are available for those who need skills to meet program standards or licensing requirements.

Accountability

Recommendation 3 — *Enact state accountability systems that assess program performance and reward quality.*

States should:

- 3.1 Establish assessment systems and strategies that support teachers' and caregivers' instruction, measure children's progress in essential domains of growth and development, and are developmentally appropriate for young children.
- 3.2 Set expectations and performance targets for publicly funded programs, and report outcomes to policymakers and education leaders regularly.
- 3.3 Enact performance-based financing policies that promote continuous improvement and reward quality in early childhood development programs and services.
- 3.4 Align standards, curricula and assessment both horizontally (within a grade level) and vertically (from prekindergarten to the third grade) to maximize the gains for young learners.
- 3.5 Ensure that financing policies call for a full analysis of the various sources of available funding — which can inform policy and future investment.
- 3.6 Incorporate early childhood program data into state longitudinal data systems to enhance capacity to track results — taking appropriate steps to ensure full security of information about individual students.
- 3.7 Establish cross-agency data analytics systems and processes that inform long-term policy and financing solutions.
- 3.8 Conduct cost-benefit analyses of programs and services to determine the effectiveness of interventions.

Access

Recommendation 4 — *Provide high-quality early learning services to the groups of young children most likely to benefit from interventions.*

States should:

- 4.1 Identify general demographic and economic factors that most interfere with school readiness in the state, and ensure services are available to address the needs of children at risk and their families.
- 4.2 Devise early-warning systems to identify specific groups of children who may benefit from early and sustained interventions — those born at low birthweight, for example, and those living with single parents in disadvantaged homes — and coordinate networks of support services for them and their families.
- 4.3 Set a goal to serve a high proportion of at-risk children in the state, and establish a plan and timetable for reaching the goal.
- 4.4 Establish eligibility priorities for participation in early childhood programs to target services to the most at-risk students so that available resources meet the greatest need.
- 4.5 Assess statewide needs, and survey programs periodically to determine if the state's early childhood programs are geographically and socioeconomically distributed to meet the state's highest needs.

Governance

Recommendation 5 — *Establish a comprehensive and integrated framework of policies and programs to support early childhood development in the state.*

States should:

- 5.1 Establish a policy and fiscal framework for early childhood development, from birth through 8 years old, as a strategic priority.
- 5.2 Create a statewide cabinet or coordinating council — responsible to the governor, legislature or key education or human services leader — to provide policy direction and coordinate overall planning for early childhood education in the state.
- 5.3 Conduct a comprehensive budget analysis of all funding streams related to early childhood development, and use the results to coordinate among multiple agencies and maximize the federal, state, local and private resources available for young children and their families.
- 5.4 Recognize early childhood programs as strategic elements of the state's overall economic and cultural development efforts, and include improvement and targeted expansion of these programs as part of any strategic state effort.

The SREB Early Childhood Commission convened leaders from 16 states to recommend policies to give more young children a solid start when they enter school. Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear chaired the SREB Commission of legislators, heads of state school agencies and other advocates for early childhood education, which met in 2014 and 2015.

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The Southern Regional Education Board works with 16 member states to improve public education at every level, from early childhood through doctoral education. A nonprofit, nonpartisan organization based in Atlanta, SREB was created in 1948 by Southern governors and legislatures to advance education and improve the social and economic life of the region.