

Early Education Programs and Children of Immigrants: Learning Each Other's Language

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Contents

The Policy Context: Early Education at the Federal and State Levels	2
Federal Opportunities	2
State Opportunities	5
Addressing the Challenges	6
Recommendations	12
Conclusion	15
References	16
Notes	18

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Child care and early education have been consistently in the news in recent months. The president has identified improved access to high-quality early childhood programs as a cornerstone of his efforts to both improve the economy and radically change outcomes for vulnerable children and families. Economists, governors, state legislators, pediatricians, and other leaders all call for increased investment in early childhood programs to ensure children arrive at school with the tools they need to learn and to thrive. Administration proposals, from Race to the Top to the Promise Neighborhoods, speak of the need to address early childhood education in state and local reform efforts.

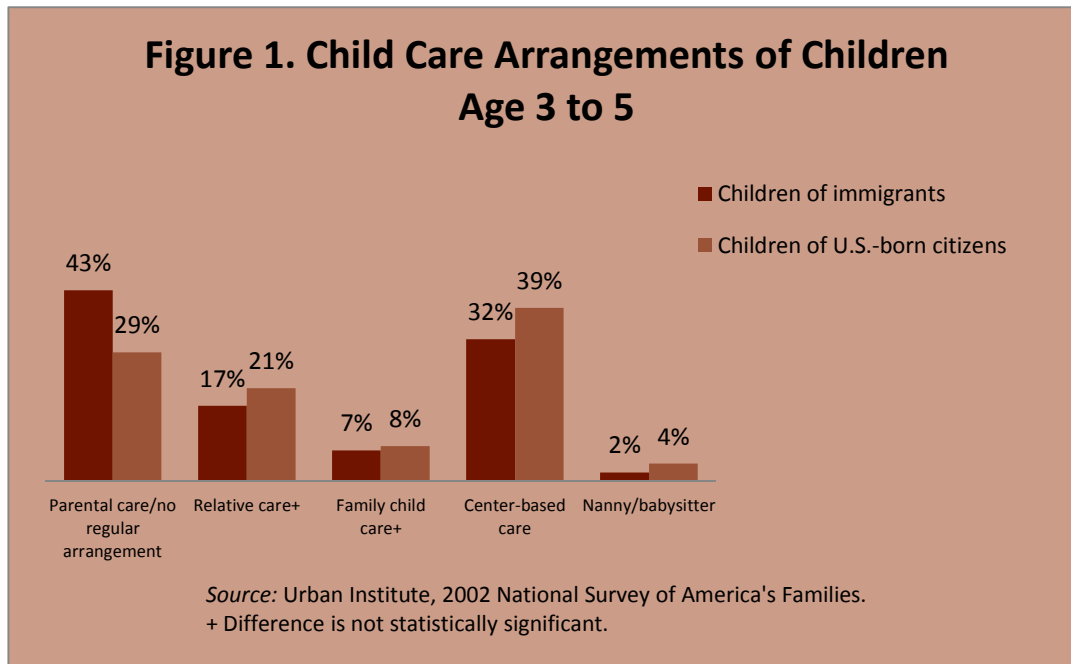
These public statements have created a sense of excitement in the early childhood field. At the same time, they have raised significant questions about what programs successfully change the odds for vulnerable populations, including young children of immigrants. One in four children under age 6 in the United States has a parent who was born outside the country, with great variation in their country of origin.¹ Children of immigrants are 25 percent of preschool-age children not in school and 22 percent of those in kindergarten and preschool (Fortuny et al. 2009).

More than one in four children under age 6 lives in households that speak a language other than English (Capps et al. 2005). Many of these children will enter school as English language learners (ELLs), also called dual language learners (DLL). The term ELL typically refers to individuals learning English as their second language. In reality, there is great diversity in the language abilities among young ELLs. Some children grow up in households only hearing and speaking a non-English language, while others learn English simultaneously with another language and are on a path to become bilingual in two (or sometimes more) languages. Young children with less exposure to English in their earliest years will be challenged by their language skills upon school entry. Research shows that ELLs score lower on measures of academic achievement than English speakers. This achievement gap begins early and persists throughout the elementary and secondary years.²

Emerging research finds that quality early education can provide significant benefits to children of immigrants and ELLs. Successful early education interventions are comprehensive, providing educational, health, mental health, and family support services, and they sustain these comprehensive supports and services during early elementary years.³ Early education also can address school readiness and English language acquisition, enabling children to enter kindergarten with more advanced English skills and, thus, better preparing them to learn and to succeed (Gormley et al. 2004; Magnuson, Lahaie, and Waldfogel 2006; Rumberger and Tran 2006). Participation in early education may also ease integration for immigrant families into American society and its education system.

Despite the opportunity of early education, immigrant families face tremendous barriers to accessing quality programs.⁴ Data suggests that ELLs and children of immigrants are less likely to participate in all types of early education programs, including pre-kindergarten programs (Matthews and Jang 2007). Forty-three percent of children of immigrants between age 3 and age 5 are in parental care or do not have a regular care arrangement. The same is true of only 29 percent of

children of U.S.-born citizens. Center-based care is the most common arrangement among all children age 3 to 5 in nonparental care, but it is less common for children of immigrants than for children of U.S.-born citizens (32 percent compared to 39 percent; see figure 1).⁵ Policies can address access barriers to services and ensure that children of immigrant families can reap the potential benefits of high-quality services in the earliest years.



The Policy Context: Early Education at the Federal and State Levels

Federal Opportunities

With more than half of young children in immigrant families in some kind of regular child care arrangement regularly, federal investments provide an opportunity to support these children at the earliest ages. Yet at the program level, where young children are in multiple settings—including public schools and other community-based settings such as for-profit and nonprofit child care centers, family child care homes, and Head Start centers—families and providers patch together multiple funding sources to create full-day and full-year high-quality programs. This provides significant challenges to using federal policy to improve the quality of early education for young children.

For preschool-age children, the child care settings determine where there are opportunities for federal intervention. While families and providers often work hard to put programs together, policymakers and agencies still struggle to create seamless opportunities for young children in federal legislation. Reauthorizations, budget discussions, and writing program guidance for the major federal child care and early education programs and the president's education reform agenda are opportunities to improve the early childhood system as a whole and better address the needs of children of immigrants:

- Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG):** Funded at \$5 billion and serving an average of 1.6 million children monthly, CCDBG has been scheduled for reauthorization for most of the last decade; congressional conversations about the program continue and may take center stage in 2010–11. Tensions between quality and access, and the cost of providing high-quality care while promoting parental choice, may continue to stall new legislation. CCDBG has few federal rules; states set income and categorical eligibility rules and determine how to use funds to improve quality and supply. These decisions influence whether and to what degree language-minority families have access to subsidies and whether providers have incentives and supports to serve these children and their families. Funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) (an additional \$2 billion over two years) has allowed states to support low-income families and to invest in new initiatives that support vulnerable children, including those in language-minority families. As states spend these funds and continue to struggle with deficits and the recession, it is unclear whether these investments will continue.

Immigrant Eligibility Rules for Federal Funding Sources of Child Care and Early Education Programs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <p>Head Start—Eligibility has no immigration restrictions.</p> <p>CCDBG—Eligibility is based on a child’s immigration status, regardless of parents’ status.</p> <p>TANF—Federal assistance generally is denied to legal immigrants during their first five years in the United States, subject to limited exceptions; in a mixed-status household, a citizen child may be eligible for assistance even if parents and other family members are ineligible.</p> <p>Title I—The 1982 Supreme Court decision <i>Plyler v. Doe</i> made clear that citizenship status is not a permissible basis for denying access to public education.</p>

- Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF):** The TANF program is scheduled for reauthorization this year, although the chances of substantial changes to the legislation in this fiscal year are small. From its inception, states have used TANF funds for both child care subsidies and to support other early childhood initiatives, including prekindergarten.⁶ The amount available for child care has fallen from \$4 billion to \$3.1 billion as the buying power of the block grant declines and as more families turn to public assistance. While immigrant families are likely ineligible for direct services and supports, states often use TANF funds to support prekindergarten and other early childhood programs in which children of immigrants may participate.
- Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA):** ESEA is also scheduled for reauthorization, and the Obama administration has proposed radical changes to the legislation. One change transforms Title I, the primary funding source for low-income students, into “College and Career Ready Students” grants, designed to promote the administration’s education reform goals originally launched in the Race to the Top competitive grant program. Whether and how to strengthen supports for programs serving young children throughout ESEA will be a thread of discussion during ESEA reauthorization; critics already have charged that the administration’s proposals, including the following three, have not sufficiently included early childhood programs:

- *Race to the Top*: The initial proposal for Race to the Top grants had little mention of state investments in early childhood. After significant advocacy, the Department of Education added an invitational priority in early childhood that carried no points. In the first round, only one funded state included any activity related to early childhood in its proposal.
- *Investing in Innovation Grants*: This second competitive grant process, open to local school districts, nonprofit organizations, and consortia of organizations, includes a priority to improve early learning outcomes, with a focus on alignment, collaboration, and transitions. The language does not address vulnerable populations such as language-minority children.
- *Promise Neighborhoods*: This new initiative from the Obama administration is designed to replicate the promise of the Harlem Children’s Zone, which included significant funding and interventions for children from birth through school entry. Promise Neighborhoods are designed “to improve significantly the educational and developmental outcomes of children in our most distressed communities, and to transform those communities.” The notice for proposals notes that “cradle-to-college-through-career” solutions are the goal, with high-quality early learning programs a required component of reform strategies and data collection requirements related to participation in early childhood programs; additionally, there is an invitational priority to address the needs of limited English proficient children. Taken together, this language suggests that Promise Neighborhoods could provide important information on how to serve young children of immigrants at the community level; however, much will depend on which proposals win the limited funding available.

Several areas of ESEA can already support-language minority children in early childhood programs:

- *Title I (Part A)* is a flexible funding source that may be used to support components of high-quality early education programs. Spending on early childhood programs for children from birth through the age of school entry has always been permitted. Yet, only a small amount (less than 5 percent) of Title I funds nationally are spent on early education. Some school districts report using Title I funds for preschool and transition activities designed to support ELLs.
- Other sections in Title I support *Even Start programs* and bilingual and migrant programs. The Even Start Family Literacy program, long a support for language-minority families with young children, has faced elimination for several years.
- *Title III* supports language instruction to help children become proficient in English. The definition includes preschool-age children, but unless they are in a school building and a focus of language instruction efforts in the school, it is unclear whether and how schools use these funds for young children.
- **Head Start**: The nation’s only federally funded preschool program, Head Start will not be reauthorized for two years or more; however, implementation of changes in the 2007 authorization will affect access and quality, especially the teachers and programs available for ELLs. The Head Start program is addressing questions around how to reach nontraditional populations, how to train classroom teachers and aides to support language-minority families, and how to blend programs and funding with state prekindergarten and other child care and early childhood programs.

- American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)/Fiscal Year 2011 Appropriations:** ARRA provided \$5 billion in funding for federal early childhood programs, concentrated in CCDBG (\$2 billion over two years) and Head Start/Early Head Start (\$2.1 billion over two years). These funds expire at the end of fiscal year (FY) 2010. The funds allowed many states to continue serving families who otherwise would have been cut from the child care subsidy program or placed on waiting lists and to invest in professional development, quality rating systems, and other supports to improve the quality of care, with specific initiatives to improve cultural competence, standards, and supports for language-minority children. While President Obama requested increased funding for CCDBG and Head Start and funding for the new programs mentioned above in his FY 2011 budget proposal, the appropriations process is mired in debates about the recession and ARRA spending as well as the growing federal deficit, and funding increases are uncertain. The increasing focus on spending freezes in discretionary programs puts these investments at risk: for example, if Congress moves to a continuing resolution and postpones any discussions of appropriations into the winter or spring, states will have to begin to reverse the policy and spending decisions they have made with ARRA funds. Further, if no additional funds are found to offset losses in school districts, cuts in staffing in classrooms and in administrative offices could profoundly affect local investments in early childhood programs.
- Early Learning Challenge Fund:** The president proposed an Early Learning Challenge Fund that would provide competitive funding to states to improve the systems needed to support quality and help more disadvantaged children participate in high-quality programs. The fund was envisioned as a way to promote access to quality programs and to provide the resources to some states to invest in quality through a new funding stream. The House of Representatives successfully passed an \$8 billion program with mandatory funding establishing the program as part of health care reform; the program included requirements that states demonstrate how they would prioritize increasing the number of limited English proficient children age birth to 5 participating in high-quality programs. That proposal did not make it into the final bill. Efforts are ongoing to create a smaller program with discretionary funds, although it is unclear whether Congress will have the funding available to create this program while also increasing funding for Head Start, CCDBG, Title I, and other priorities.

State Opportunities

Outside state investments in child care subsidy programs, state funding for early education is concentrated largely in prekindergarten programs for 3- and 4-year-old children. With few exceptions, most programs serve a small fraction of states' preschoolers. Moreover, as the economic recession has hit state budgets, early education has not been spared. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research, state prekindergarten programs have experienced cuts in enrollment and quality initiatives over the past year (Barnett et al. 2010). As many state prekindergarten programs include federal funds as part of their financing, state expansion of early education opportunities for all young children, including children of immigrants, will likely require increased federal dollars. Regardless, states play an important role in developing policies and standards in their programs. State prekindergarten programs vary widely in design and could facilitate improved access for ELLs and children in immigrant families.

Interviews with state prekindergarten administrators reveal that while many states are considering the needs of ELLs in their preschool standards, policies related to ELLs are often vague or contain few details related to their implementation.⁷

Addressing the Challenges

As state and federal governments authorize or implement early childhood education programs, policymakers must develop solutions to address the barriers that children in immigrant families face. These solutions should include awareness of early education opportunities, accessibility of those services, and responsiveness to the unique needs of immigrant families.

Children of immigrants and ELLs could be better served by addressing three policy areas in state and federal regulations, guidance, and legislation:

- **Targeting ELLs.** Most state prekindergarten programs target at-risk populations, including low-income children and children with special needs. Head Start and child care subsidy programs are similarly targeted, with poverty status (Head Start) and income and work status (subsidies) driving eligibility. States may include ELLs among their target at-risk populations for state prekindergarten and some subsidy funds, or use ELL status to prioritize enrollment among eligible children. Typically services are not specific to children of immigrants, as the law prohibits schools from requiring information on children's immigration status and Head Start is not considered a **public benefit**. While including ELL children in target populations for preschool services does not necessarily result in enrollment of ELL children, it does signal recognition of possible disadvantages some ELL children face at kindergarten entry, such as English language delays, and the importance of including this growing population in targeted interventions. If linked with parent information and outreach efforts, targeting ELLs can be an important way of expanding early childhood education enrollment among this group.
- **Setting early education standards.** Standards are important tools to help improve the quality of all early learning settings for all young children and to support children's healthy development across a range of measures. To most effectively meet the needs of ELLs, states must infuse their needs throughout all standards. State prekindergarten standards address all areas from staff training requirements to permissible curriculum. The Head Start Performance Standards include more than 20 references to home language, learning English, or the cultural background of families and children. Programs are required to meet the needs of ELL children and their families in multiple service areas, including education, family partnerships, and health and developmental services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2005). The Head Start Multicultural Task Force has issued multicultural principles for Head Start programming, which could serve as a model for other early childhood programs. All early childhood policies can support children from all backgrounds and can include attention to second-language acquisition strategies and culturally and linguistically appropriate practices. However, standards must be coordinated and aligned vertically (across program streams for a particular age group) and horizontally (from birth through preschool and into the early elementary years).
- **Hiring bilingual staff.** Programs without sufficient bilingual staff face many challenges appropriately serving ELLs, including performing assessments and communicating with families. States can set policies around requirements for bilingual teachers, directors, and

administrators; invest in bilingual staff in state agencies and where families apply for preschool or subsidy programs; require appropriate use of interpreters in prekindergarten programs; and use quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) and rate incentives and targeted contracts for subsidized children to promote the training, recruitment, and recruitment of bilingual staff.

To identify solutions, policymakers may benefit from addressing barriers in awareness, accessibility, and responsiveness.

1. **Awareness.** Immigrant families often are unaware of the availability of early education programs and services or of the eligibility rules for various programs.

- What outreach is done to tell families about programs? Which programs fund outreach? How does that affect the information families have about early childhood programs? Who is responsible for outreach? In what languages is information provided? What is the role of trusted messengers? Are there links with immigrant-serving organizations?

Immigrants who have been in the United States for longer periods tend to be more familiar with child care and early education programs. More recent immigrants tend to have limited awareness of both the availability of early education programs and the educational benefits they can provide. In particular, recent immigrants may be removed from traditional social networks that would help them access local information (Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families 2006). Recent immigrants also have had less time to adjust to life in a new country and less time to become naturalized citizens (Hernandez 2004). Research confirms that preschool participation for immigrant families increases by generation (Chiswick and DebBurman 2004). Recent immigrants are also more likely to be lower income, to have fewer years of formal education, and to have less English proficiency—all of which may correlate with lower awareness of child care and early education. The circumstances of immigrants' arrival—that is, whether through legal or unauthorized channels—also affects the extent of their awareness.

An overall underfunded early childhood system makes it difficult to address the lack of information in immigrant communities. Outreach for early education programs is often limited and is inadequately targeted to diverse immigrant communities.

State child care subsidy programs typically have long wait lists, with eligible families often waiting years before they can get help paying for child care. For that reason, many subsidy programs do not advertise the availability of assistance. Across the country, most Head Start programs have significant wait lists, due to funding constraints. While Head Start is obligated to do outreach in the communities they serve, the reality is that many programs are full the day they open enrollment. The majority of state prekindergarten programs serve only a fraction of eligible children. These limits make it difficult for young children in immigrant and language-minority families to get into the programs they need to support their home language development and help them learn English, even when resources are available.

Many immigrant-serving organizations are not aware of early education opportunities; therefore, many are not able to convey information about early education to immigrant families. Links with these organizations are underused as they are often the first point of contact for new immigrant families in a community.

2. **Accessibility.** For those immigrant families who are aware of early education, factors such as location, affordability, and complex eligibility and enrollment processes limit participation.

- Are immigrant families eligible for programs? What are the measures of eligibility— income, English language proficiency, community of residence, etc.—and who decides what qualifies a family? Are any families automatically excluded by immigrant status? How are parents or other family members included? How do families from different language and cultural groups make decisions about accessing different programs?

Federal, state, and local policies set the context for immigrant families' access to these programs in various ways—because they determine eligibility and can foster either apprehension or assurance among immigrant families who wish to participate in programs. Immigration policies and federal and state rules and regulations for child care and early education funding streams can improve access for immigrant families, but they can also serve as barriers.

Many states deliver prekindergarten services in both public schools and community-based child care settings—settings that may also receive other federal (Head Start, Title I) or state (child care quality) funds. Families decide where to enroll their children but are also constrained by such issues as cost, location, transportation, and language barriers. All settings must have the support, regardless of funding stream, to serve language-minority families as different families will make distinct choices in early education settings for their children.

Even those immigrant families that are aware of some child care and early education programs and services may be misinformed of the eligibility rules for individual programs—including that their U.S.-citizen children can access most noncash benefits, including child care, without affecting the parent's immigration status.⁸ Misinformation is not always intentional. Families may be confused about or misunderstand eligibility rules; they may be directly misinformed by state, local, or program personnel; or they may be misinformed by friends and informal networks.

Federal education programs have differing rules regarding immigration eligibility. Low-income immigrants often do not understand eligibility rules for public benefits. For example, in a survey of low-income immigrants in Los Angeles and New York City, half the respondents gave incorrect answers to at least two of three questions about program eligibility and mistakenly thought that receiving public benefits—even for their citizen children—might jeopardize their immigrant status (Capps et al. 2002). In a survey of child care needs in Miami, the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center (2006) reported that “the immigrant community is confused about whom to trust and where to go for accurate information. Many immigrants had incorrect information about the eligibility requirements for early education programs and child care providers.”

Many families assume that they do not qualify for public programs, including Head Start and child care subsidies, because of immigrant restrictions. Parents and providers—including providers from immigrant-serving agencies—have reported that they believe that children of undocumented parents cannot enroll in Head Start.⁹ In reality, Head Start does not have immigration restrictions. In some communities, awareness of publicly funded benefits and services was coupled with confusion about services that could have immigration or other consequences. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) conducted focus groups of Spanish- and Vietnamese-speaking parents that uncovered misconceptions about subsidies, including the belief that children might later be drafted into the armed forces to repay assistance (GAO 2006).

Fifteen states either include ELL status as an eligibility factor for enrollment in their state prekindergarten program or use ELL status in some way at the state or local level to prioritize or

determine enrollment.¹⁰ In additional states, risk categories for targeting state prekindergarten are determined locally and may include ELL status. Few states have explicit state prekindergarten policies on how ELL or LEP status is determined at the preschool level. In some cases, ELLs are not explicitly identified as a target group but fall under another target group of children generally at risk for language development, such as in California and Colorado. In Maryland, not only are ELLs targeted for preschool services, but the Division of Early Childhood Development's three-year strategic plan includes an objective to reduce the skills gap for ELLs (among other priority groups). Articulating this focus on ELLs can lead to prioritized services and help school districts, programs, and teachers understand the importance of implementing strategies that benefit ELLs.¹¹

3. **Responsiveness.** Early education programs must respond to the needs of diverse immigrant families. This includes an adequate supply of qualified bilingual and culturally competent providers to work with young children, culturally competent content and program standards, and access to high-quality comprehensive services and family supports.
 - Are policies, guidance or regulations in place that promote cultural competence? Are professional development and other supports available? What available data help programs understand and adjust to the needs of language-minority families? What is the role of early learning standards? Of QRIS? How can efforts at alignment with K–12 help or hinder the ability of early childhood programs to serve language-minority children?

The major federal early childhood programs have little regulation or guidance addressing the needs of children in immigrant families or language-minority children, apart from eligibility rules. While CCDBG and TANF do not address the needs of language-minority children in regulations or guidance, the Head Start program does have a number of standards related to culturally and linguistically diverse children and is increasingly working to address the needs of dual-language learners. As noted earlier, the Head Start Multicultural Principles, first written in 1991 and updated in 2009, provide guidelines for programs on working with diverse families.¹² The program also requires bilingual staff when a majority of children speak a language other than English. The Office of Head Start has developed tools for programs and provides professional development opportunities for staff to better serve culturally and linguistically diverse children.¹³ Policies related to bilingual staff or instruction in state preschool are vague at best. For example, requirements for interpretation or translation often do not specify the use of qualified, paid translators and interpreters. Requirements for bilingual staff may not include instructions on appropriate roles for staff, for example, actively engaging children in their native language rather than serving as interpreters for English instruction. Policies also may lack information about implementation when multiple languages are spoken in a classroom or when there is not a single majority minority language, which is the case in many classrooms across the country.

Few states specify conditions under which bilingual staff are required. Nebraska requires a bilingual staff person if a majority of children in a prekindergarten classroom speak a language other than English. If ELLs make up fewer than 50 percent of the classroom, programs must identify lay persons to be available for translation and interpretation. Oregon follows the Head Start standards, which also require bilingual staff when 50 percent of the children in a classroom speak a language other than English. New Jersey requires interpreters or bilingual staff to be available for ELLs. Preschool programs are rated on their use of interpreters during program evaluations. School districts are encouraged to hire master teachers with bilingual expertise or certification. New York requires any prekindergarten teacher to have a bilingual certificate

extension or license to teach LEP children. Teaching assistants and teacher aides in programs for LEP children must have proficiency in the children's home language.¹⁴

Research supports the effectiveness of instruction for young children in both their home language and in English (August, Calderón, and Carlo 2002; Barnett et al. 2006; Tabors 1997). Twenty states report permitting bilingual prekindergarten classes or monolingual prekindergarten classes in languages other than English (Barnett et al. 2010). Texas requires a school district that has 20 or more LEP students from any language group to create a dual language prekindergarten program.¹⁵

Meeting the needs of ELLs requires understanding and implementing appropriate strategies for working with second-language learners. All states have either developed early learning guidelines for preschool-age children or are developing them. These guidelines are voluntary expectations for young children's approaches to learning and skills at certain stages and across all developmental domains. Several states have translated their early learning standards, most often into Spanish. California is the only state to have specific early learning standards developed for ELLs. Several states report having early learning standards appropriate for ELLs and culturally diverse children. However, most references to these populations in the standards are often vague and do not necessarily provide guidance and strategies for implementation. In order to most effectively meet the needs of young children of immigrants and their families, attention to the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families must be infused throughout all standards. Program standards are requirements for early childhood programs that ensure conditions in which children are more likely to learn. These include child group size, teacher-to-child ratio, teacher qualifications, required curriculum, and the nature and intensity of comprehensive services. Content standards, or early learning guidelines, are expectations for what children should learn and be able to do by certain stages of development.

Both types of standards play a key role in supporting children's development in early education. Strong, culturally competent standards should be supportive of children and providers from all backgrounds and should address the needs of children of immigrants, through attention to second-language acquisition strategies and culturally appropriate curriculum. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has developed a set of quality benchmarks for cultural competence for providers to measure their activities and standards against (NAEYC 2009); further, NAEYC and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists (NAECS) note that any tools used to assess children's progress toward standards must be linguistically and culturally valid (NAEYC and NAECS n.d.). Efforts to align state early learning standards with K–3 standards and assessments must reflect the full range of developmental, cultural, and linguistic needs of young children, while ensuring that children at each age and stage are being asked to meet standards that are appropriate for their age and development. Finally, all standards should be accompanied by professional development and mentoring with all those working in early childhood settings, including directors and other administrators, teachers and paraprofessionals, and family service workers.

Some states, including Louisiana, encourage teachers to include children's home languages in the prekindergarten classroom. The Kentucky Preschool Program Outline includes the following language, "If the child's home language is different from English, the teacher works with the family to create an environment which will support the home language as well as introduce the child to the sounds, vocabulary, and the structure of the English language" (Kentucky Department of Education 2008, 9). According to Michigan's Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Prekindergarten, a quality program is one that "fosters children's primary

language, while supporting the continued development of English” (Michigan Department of Education 2005, 40). Children are also expected to show progress in speaking, listening, and understanding in both their home language and in English. Nebraska’s early learning guidelines address cultural competency and ELLs, and include expectations around demonstrated learning in both home and English languages (Nebraska Department of Education 2005).

Guidelines or standards providing instructions for implementation are most practical for teachers and other staff working with children. Georgia’s prekindergarten standards include a page on strategies to support ELLs (Bright from the Start 2007). The Texas prekindergarten guidelines include an introductory section on how the guidelines support instruction for ELLs. The guidelines not only explain instructional practices that benefit ELLs, they also include basic explanation of second-language acquisition to aid teachers’ understandings of the dynamics of how ELL children acquire language skills. Throughout the guidelines, additional instructional techniques and child behaviors specific to ELL children are embedded (Texas Education Agency 2008). New Jersey’s *Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines* contain several pages of information on supporting ELLs. They describe how bilingual staff should incorporate children’s home languages into the program and serve as language models. They describe appropriate activities and strategies to support early language and literacy development for ELLs, appropriate classroom environments for ELLs, and the role for school districts in supporting teachers working with ELLs.

Outside state prekindergarten, states have used CCDBG quality funds to improve the quality of care, often through quality rating and improvement systems. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, 18 states have established statewide QRIS, and an additional 27 have QRIS in development. QRIS are voluntary systems for evaluating and communicating the level of quality of a child care setting. QRIS can be important tools for improving services for young children of immigrants in community-based child care settings. States can use QRIS to encourage early childhood programs to employ staff who demonstrate competence in working with diverse children and families, access meaningful cultural competency training, plan for communicating with linguistically diverse families, and incorporate children’s home language and culture in daily activities and learning. States should provide financial supports to help programs meet these goals. States can also translate QRIS parent education materials to ensure programs inform language minority parents about quality early childhood standards.

Many early childhood staff working with young ELLs seek additional training and supports to best meet the needs of children in their classrooms (Matthews and Jang 2007). State administrators reported that some training was available for preschool teachers on working with ELLs or diverse children but administrators rarely were able to detail the training content. In some cases, administrators reported that early childhood professionals needed coursework related to cultural or linguistic diversity to attain teaching certificates and credentials. However, related research has shown that the higher education system is ill equipped to appropriately prepare early childhood professionals to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse young children, and that curriculum and content on appropriately serving ELLs and other diverse groups is lacking.¹⁶

Few states described specific training initiatives. New Jersey’s preschool guidelines list the specific areas related to ELLs on which professional development should focus. The state

provides ELL-specific training at the state level for a core group of master teachers. These teachers will work with other preschool teachers. In Texas, teachers in bilingual programs, from prekindergarten to 1st grade, receive training in LEER MAS, an instructional model for literacy development in bilingual children. Fundamental components of LEER MAS include oral language, phonological awareness, print and book knowledge, alphabetic principle, fluency, comprehension, and written expression.¹⁷

Recommendations

Adequately addressing the early education needs of children of immigrants requires intentional federal and state policy. Federal policymakers should increase funding for the early childhood system as a whole and encourage state and local early childhood providers to better serve children of immigrants and ELLs in all settings through existing and new legislation. The federal government has an opportunity to learn from state preschool programs and promote best practices. In particular, the Obama administration and Congress could make the following improvements:

- Continue ARRA funding for CCDBG and Head Start so states and local communities can continue to serve low-income children, including children in immigrant families.
- Use CCDBG guidance and reauthorization to expand access to quality early childhood settings for children in immigrant families.
 - Guidance:
 - Encourage states to use existing quality funds to provide training and technical assistance related to meeting the needs of ELLs and culturally and linguistically diverse children.
 - Fund national research and technical assistance to assist states developing QRIS to include measures related to cultural competency and provide support for programs to meet such standards.
 - Include attention to access and awareness barriers and program responsiveness—especially in QRIS—in performance measures developed by and for the Child Care Bureau within ACF.
 - Work with the Office of Refugee Resettlement in ACF and the Department of Education’s Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students to increase knowledge of quality early childhood programs at the family and program level, provide links between state child care administrators and state education agencies working with language-minority children, and collect, evaluate, and share best practices.
 - Reauthorization:
 - Require or encourage states to provide grants to community-based organizations to support the development and implementation of effective outreach models to help immigrant families learn about and access preschool services.
 - Include the data collection components of the House-passed version of the Early Learning Challenge Fund to promote use of CCDBG to serve young children in immigrant families who are limited English proficient.

- Require states to use up to 30 percent of funding for direct contracts to agencies to serve low-income families; a portion of these could be designed to serve young children in immigrant families.
 - Provide funds for outreach and encourage states to provide grants for immigrant-serving organizations to develop general information about early childhood programs in appropriate formats and in the primary languages of immigrants in their communities.
 - Require states to provide information about child care subsidies in the majority languages in the state.
 - Authorize grants to develop, implement, and demonstrate the effectiveness of techniques and approaches for training early childhood providers with limited English proficiency to provide high-quality child care.
 - Ensure that Promise Neighborhood pilots are meeting full-day and full-year early childhood needs for children in low-income families and are serving children representing the local demographics, with priority for children in language-minority families.
- As the Office of Head Start implements the 2007 reauthorization, there are several opportunities to promote high-quality services for young children in immigrant families:
 - Use the Head Start Training and Technical Assistance system and professional development funds to promote best practices across programs and funding streams by including child care center teachers, family child care providers, and state preschool teachers in training opportunities.
 - Promote the Head Start Multicultural Principles to a broader audience, including state prekindergarten and child care subsidy administrators.
 - Improve data collection in the program information reports (PIR) to allow for cross-tabulation by language spoken and to collect information on the languages spoken by staff, with the ability to cross-tabulate by education.
 - Work with the Child Care Bureau to promote partnership models between Head Start, child care centers, family child care providers, and schools to serve additional eligible children for a full day and year and share resources, including those designed by Head Start to serve children in immigrant families.
 - Help underenrolled programs identify immigrant and other underserved communities and design programs to meet the needs of those children, through training, partnerships with immigrant-serving organizations, and technical assistance.
 - Encourage states to use early childhood advisory councils to address the early childhood needs of young children in immigrant families through better demographic data on children, families, and the early childhood workforce.
- Use ESEA reauthorization and proposed new guidance for Title I to promote appropriate investments and prioritize services for young children of immigrants.
 - Guidance:
 - Highlight LEAs that are using Title I funds to serve young children in immigrant families.
 - Promote professional development models that support limited English proficient children and encourage school districts to include both school-based preschool providers and community-based providers.

- Promote links with Even Start family literacy programs serving immigrant families.
- Share information on best practices in training teachers and paraprofessionals working with children in immigrant families.
- Ensure that information about access to grants and loans for postsecondary education and loan forgiveness programs is available in multiple languages.
- Reauthorization:
 - Embed language prioritizing services for young children in immigrant families throughout all Titles of ESEA or any new programs created under ESEA.
 - Insert language in Title III that supports the development of state and local professional development opportunities for school-based teachers and community-based providers working with Title I–eligible children to gain knowledge of child development and learning, which would include appropriate practices for working with English language learners of children birth through age 8.
 - Create dedicated funding to support planning grants or incentive for state education agencies to expand the use of Title I funds for early education, which would expand the availability of quality early education programs.
 - Improve data collection to better understand how LEAs are serving young children before the age of school entry, with specific data points for language-minority children in these programs.
 - Provide grant funding for family literacy models that can target immigrant families.

Strong program and content standards are essential to promote quality early learning experiences for linguistically and culturally diverse young children; and the implementation of quality standards requires ongoing training and technical assistance for state prekindergarten administrators, directors, and teachers. As states develop and expand their preschool policies related to ELLs, policymakers may want to consider the following:

- Articulate a vision for providing high-quality early education to ELLs. This may be committing to reducing participation and skills gaps between ELLs and their English-speaking peers, a goal of bilingualism for all prekindergarten children, or a statement of recognition of the importance of native language development.
- Expand access to state-funded preschool programs by including ELLs in targeted groups for eligibility and targeting outreach efforts for language-minority communities. This may include contracting directly with immigrant-serving organizations to provide preschool services.
- Create formal partnerships and collaborate with diverse organizations, including immigrant-serving organizations, to conduct outreach for preschool.
- Move beyond generalizations to create policies and implementation guidance that provide practical strategies and approaches teachers can use in classrooms. States should ensure that the most recent research on second-language learning informs the development of policies and practices.
- Require all prekindergarten staff—including teachers, directors, and principals—have meaningful training in second-language acquisition strategies and cultural competency to effectively work with all children and their families.

- Require preschool providers to create language access plans. Programs should have plans in place to support the native language development of ELL children and to communicate with parents who speak languages other than English. Plans should ensure that parent information is available in accessible formats and include the use of translated materials and face-to-face communication.
- Ensure that preschool curriculum and instruction support both English and home-language development and expand the number of dual-language programs.
- Encourage the hiring of bilingual teachers and provide guidance to programs on appropriate roles for bilingual staff in the prekindergarten classroom. States policymakers can support the growth of a bilingual workforce by contributing to scholarship programs and providing other incentives for teachers.

Conclusion

Children from immigrant families are the fastest growing group of children in the United States, and nearly all young children of immigrants living in the United States are U.S. citizens. High-quality child care and early education opportunities will be critical to these children’s success in school and in life. Yet, the early experiences of children in immigrant families are as diverse and varied as immigrant families themselves. While many immigrant families face numerous barriers to accessing high-quality child care and early education for their young children, these barriers are not insurmountable. Unique solutions to improving access for immigrant families are already emerging in local communities and in state policies. Reaching all children of immigrants, and successfully including them in child care and early education initiatives, will require specific strategies and collaborations among providers, policymakers, and immigrant-serving organizations.

Above all, it will require understanding and respecting the needs and preferences of diverse families. Meeting the needs of the growing population of young children of immigrants presents a challenge for the early childhood field. It is a challenge, however, that is essential to meet. If children of immigrant families are given opportunities to participate, and if programs reflect their experiences, the linguistic and cultural diversity that these children offer will ultimately enrich the early childhood experiences of *all* children.

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Notes

¹ Migration Policy Institute, “MPI Data Hub: 2008 American Community Survey and Census Data on the Foreign Born by State,” <http://www.migrationinformation.org/datahub/acscensus.cfm>.

² See U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, “The Nation’s Report Card,” <http://nationsreportcard.gov/>; and National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics (2007).

³ Children who participated in two model early education programs, the Abecedarian Project and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, showed increased gains when services continued into early elementary school. While children in both programs outperformed their peers who did not participate in either preschool program, those who continued to receive services during the early elementary years saw increased gains in academic achievement over those children who received fewer years of services (Reynolds, Magnuson, and Ou 2006).

⁴ For a complete discussion of the barriers immigrant families face, see Matthews and Jang (2007).

⁵ Unpublished Urban Institute analysis of data from the 2002 National Survey of America’s Families. This sample excludes 5-year-olds enrolled in kindergarten.

⁶ CLASP analysis of NIEER data suggests that in 2009, at least 3.9 percent of total state pre-kindergarten funding was from TANF.

⁷ In 2008, CLASP conducted a series of interviews with state pre-kindergarten administrators, which included questions on serving ELLs.

⁸ A child’s use of cash assistance, if it is the sole income for the family, could have “public charge” consequences and may affect a parent’s application for legal residency. See U.S. Department of Justice, *Field Guidance on Deportability and Inadmissibility on Public Charge Grounds*, 64 Fed Reg. 28689 (March 26, 1999).

⁹ Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center, *Final Report for Breaking Down Barriers* and meeting with parents and SPARK Hub coordinators, La Escuelita, Norcross, Georgia, October 25, 2005.

¹⁰ These states are Arkansas, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington.

¹¹ Maryland Department of Education, Strategic Plan of the Division of Early Childhood Development, <http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/NR/rdonlyres/38C2D261-0C1C-45B6-BD7C-F4C1C3347F0E/11472/strategicplan1.pdf>

¹² See Early Head Start National Resource Center (2010).

¹³ See Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, “Dual Language Learners,” <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/Dual%20Language%20Learners>.

¹⁴ New York Universal Prekindergarten, Staff Qualifications, 8 NYCRR Section 151-1.5.

¹⁵ Texas Administrative Code §89.1205.

¹⁶ See for example, Ray, Bowman, and Robbins (2006); Early and Winton (2001); and Lobman et al. (2004).

¹⁷ Texas Education Agency, “Curriculum: Bilingual Education; TEA-Sponsored Resources,” <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/curriculum/biling/tearesources.html>.