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Strong Start For America's Children Act Offers New Hope For Children Birth Through Five

High quality early childhood development and learning interventions serve as a buffer to the negative effects of poverty and provide a foundation for future success with lifelong benefits, particularly for the poorest and most vulnerable children. Studies have shown that children who benefit from high quality early childhood programs are more likely to graduate from high school, hold a job, make more money and be less likely to commit a crime than their peers who do not participate.ⁱ Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman estimates a lifelong economic rate of return of seven to 10 percent per year per dollar invested.ⁱⁱ Investing in quality early childhood development and learning is an effective poverty prevention strategy.

The Strong Start for America's Children Act invests in and encourages expansions of high quality home visiting programs, Early Head Start, Head Start, child care, pre-kindergarten (pre-K) and quality kindergarten programs to reach poor and low income children birth through age 5.

The Act offers federal support for a range of high quality early childhood learning and development initiatives:

- Guaranteed support for **Pre-Kindergarten Access Grants** for quality pre-kindergarten programs for 4-year-olds in families at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL), which may be provided by local education agencies, community-based early childhood education providers (such as Head Start and child care programs) or consortia of the two, with partnerships among them. Twenty percent of the funds awarded in the first four years may be used for quality improvements to support high quality pre-K programs. Up to 15 percent of the funds may be used to provide high quality early childhood education programs for infants and toddlers in families at or below 200 percent FPL.
- Competitive **Pre-Kindergarten Development Grants** to help states put high quality standards in place so they can, within three years, apply for the new Pre-Kindergarten Access Grants.
- **Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships** to help child care centers and family care homes improve the quality of their services for infants and toddlers and children through age 3 so that they can meet Early Head Start performance standards within three years.
- **Improvements in the Child Care and Development Block Grant** to strengthen the quality of child care, promote 12 months of continuous care for children and families and establish new demonstration and pilot programs to support low income families needing or receiving child care.
- **Encourages continued funding for the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program** that offers voluntary evidence-based home visiting programs for young children and their families to promote maternal and child health, improve school readiness, prevent child abuse and neglect, support family economic self sufficiency, reduce crime and delinquency and support community resources.

- **Encourages transition and increases access to high quality kindergarten, with special attention to full-day kindergarten.**

The Act promotes quality care for poor and low-income children, including those with special needs. Funded pre-K programs must:

- **Meet high quality benchmarks.**
 - Serve 4-year-olds or 3- and 4-year-olds
 - Require high staff qualification, including a bachelor's degree in early childhood or a related field
 - Provide high quality professional development for all staff
 - Offer salaries comparable to K-12 teacher salaries
 - Meet evidence-based maximum class sizes and child-staff ratios
 - Offer "full day" pre-K
 - Provide developmentally appropriate evidence-based curricula and learning environments aligned with the state's early learning and development standards
 - Provide accessible comprehensive services for children
 - Provide for ongoing monitoring and program evaluation to ensure continuous improvement
- **Reach out to children in poor and low income families.** States must report annually on progress in providing access to high quality pre-K for children in families with incomes up to and including 200 percent FPL, including the percent of funds spent on children under 100 percent, between 100 and 150 percent and between 150 and 200 percent.
- **Promote partnerships for a mixed service delivery system** that engages local education agencies and community based early childhood education programs.
- **Perform outreach to homeless children, dual language learners, children in foster care, children with disabilities and migrant children to engage them in high quality pre-K programs.**
- **Promote family support and parent engagement** and assess with parents, community members and organizations a coordinated system to facilitate services, and referrals and provision of services related to health, nutrition, mental health, disabilities and family support for children enrolled.
- **Encourage coordination, access and transition to high quality kindergarten.**

ⁱ Schweinhart, Lawrence J., Jeanne Montie, Zongping Xiang, W. Steven Barnett, Clive R. Belfield, and Milagros Nores. 2005. "The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40: Summary, Conclusions, and Frequently Asked Questions." High Scope Press.

ⁱⁱ Heckman, James J. 2011. "The Economics of Inequality: The Value of Early Childhood Education." The American Educator. <http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/spring2011/Heckman.pdf>.