

## Federal Update: Early Learning Challenge Fund

Representative George Miller (D-CA), the Chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, introduced a bill on July 15, 2009 that would establish an Early Learning Challenge Fund to incentivize states to establish systems for improving the quality of early learning settings for children ages birth to five and increase disadvantaged children's access to high-quality early learning programs. This initiative, which is proposed as part of [The Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2009 \(H.R. 3221\)](#), was developed in collaboration with the Obama Administration. The legislation would provide \$1 billion a year for 8 years for the Early Learning Challenge Fund using savings obtained through streamlining the federal student loan program.

**Current Status:** On September 17, 2009, H.R. 3221 passed in the House of Representatives by a vote of 253-171. The Senate is expected to deliberate on this bill in the coming months.

### General funding

- 2% administration
- 3% research and evaluation
- No more than 65% Quality Pathway grants (2010 – 2012)
- No more than 85% Quality Pathway grants (after 2013)

### Competitive grants defined in the Early Learning Challenge Fund (ELCF)

#### 1. Quality Pathways Grant:

- Available to states that have already made progress toward establishing a system for improving early education program quality, and are increasing the number of disadvantaged children participating in high quality programs;
- Funding for improving teacher credentials, integrating states' early learning standards into practice, engaging families, developing a quality rating and improvement system, building data infrastructure, measuring school readiness, and other quality investments;
- Five year renewable grant;
  - Requires a state match which may include private contributions, beginning at 10% and increasing to 15% in the third year and 20% in the fourth;
  - Represents the majority of ELCF funds.

#### 2. Development Grant:

- Available to states that exhibit some elements of early learning systems-building, but do not yet meet the criteria for Quality Pathway Grants;
- Same eligible quality expenditures as Quality Pathway Grants;
- Three year nonrenewable grant;
- Requires a state match, beginning at 20% and increasing to 30%.

#### Quality Pathway Grant, State Application:

States must submit an application that includes descriptions of the elements below in their quality improvement systems. The bill contains no metrics for defining progress or full implementation.

**Major Themes:** Low-income children, English language learners (ELL), Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS), data collection and infrastructure, implementation of standards.

- Progress on implementation of quality initiatives (birth - 5)
- Goals & benchmarks to increase disadvantaged children's access to high-quality early learning programs

- Governance structures, including:
  - Early learning standards
  - QRIS
  - Program supports
  - Preservice requirements in education and training
  - Professional development
  - Parent engagement
  - Screenings and referrals
  - School readiness evaluation data
  - Data infrastructure to track program quality, essential child and family information, and interoperability with k-12 data systems
- Attention to special populations
  - Efforts to prioritize, document, and address low-income access to high-quality early learning programs
  - Services and professional development for ELLs
  - Services for special education students
- Commitment to improving quality across all provider types
- Aligning early learning standards with those of grades K-3, and existing early childhood program quality standards
- Use of funds as supplement to, not replacement of, existing funds
- Coordination of early childhood funds, including:
  - Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG)
  - Head Start
  - Title I
  - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
  - State-funded pre-k programs

*Note: Development Grants require states to describe the same elements with the expectation of limited progress in multiple areas.*

### Use of Grants

States could use their grants for two or more of these activities, including:

- Improving the credentials and compensation of the early childhood workforce.
- Helping programs meet higher quality standards.
- Implementing classroom observation assessments tied to improvements in instructional practices.
- Making financial incentives available to programs for quality improvements.
- Providing information to communities and families about program quality and encouraging family engagement.
- Supporting screenings and referrals for health, mental health, family support, and other services.
- Developing and implementing data systems.

### Reporting

Annual reporting requirements dictate that states provide extensive data to the Secretary of Education, including:

- Children – number and percent enrolled in every level of program quality, disaggregated by race, income, special needs, language, etc.
- Programs – number of programs at each level of quality, disaggregated by provider type; number of high-quality programs available to low income communities.
- Providers – changes in education level and compensation, disaggregated by provider type and education degree.

### Additional notes:

- Once states have made sufficient progress in implementing the provisions of the grant, they can apply for permission to use up to 25 percent of their funds to increase disadvantaged children's access to high-quality programs that offer full-day services (requires 20% state match).
- States would be expected to maintain their current contributions to child care, Head Start, prekindergarten, and other early learning programs.
- Waivers may be granted in the case of extreme financial hardship.
- The Secretary of Education and the Secretary of Health and Human Services would jointly administer the program.