



The Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education Joint Interdepartmental Review of All Early Learning Programs for Children Less Than 6 Years of Age

Executive Summary

A large body of research demonstrates that high-quality early learning experiences – healthy and safe environments, nurturing relationships with program staff, developmentally appropriate and rich curricula, and supportive services that foster learning and development – are critical to setting a strong foundation for children’s success in school and life. Children in high-quality programs, especially children from low-income families, show greater readiness for school and development of skills needed for lifelong success. Affordable, high-quality early learning programs make it more likely that families will be able to work. Economists have found that high-quality early learning programs have a high return for the public investment, with savings resulting from improved educational outcomes, fewer placements in special education, increased labor productivity, and reduced criminal activity.

The cost of early learning programs, especially care for infants and toddlers, is prohibitive for many families to manage on their own. Many programs struggle with current resources to meet and sustain high-quality early learning experiences for young children.

Congress requested that the Secretary of Health and Human Services, in conjunction with the Secretary of Education, review the Government Accountability Office (GAO) report *2012 Annual Report: Opportunities to Reduce Duplication, Overlap and Fragmentation, Achieve*

Savings, and Enhance Revenue (GAO-12-342SP) on duplication of early learning and care programs and submit a report to Congress that outlines efficiencies that can be achieved, including recommendations for eliminating overlapping programs and streamlining early learning programs serving children under age six. As Congress noted in its request for this report, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) identified 45 federal programs that provide or may support related services to children under age six, as well as five tax provisions that subsidize private expenditures in this area. The methodology GAO used resulted in the inclusion of programs regardless of whether the primary purpose is early childhood education or what proportion of the funding is expended for early learning.¹

A June 23, 2015 report by the Congressional Research Service (CRS), *Early Childhood Care and Education: Background and Funding*,² identified a more limited list of programs and tax provisions targeted to early learning and care, as well as related programs that allow early learning as a permissible use of funds. As both GAO and CRS have noted, while some programs allow spending on early learning, given the multiple demands on these funds there is no requirement and no assurance that grantees will use funds for early learning. In this report, we discuss the federal programs identified by GAO, including the eight programs we identified with the primary purpose of promoting early learning for children from birth to age six. These early learning programs are severely underfunded, leaving substantial numbers of eligible children unable to benefit from them, and leaving many child care programs without the level of resources needed to provide and sustain high-quality services.

The long-standing federal investment in early learning and care reflects recognition of the diversity of children's and working families' needs. Some programs are focused on the specialized needs of infants and toddlers while others promote early learning for disadvantaged children during the two years before kindergarten. Some programs operate during a traditional school day and year while others meet the needs of families for additional hours of care for the full year. Some programs provide children nutritious food and health services to enable children to thrive and learn.

¹ 2012 Annual Report: Opportunities to Reduce Duplication, Overlap and Fragmentation, Achieve Savings, and Enhance Revenue, GAO-12-342SP (Washington, D.C.: February 28, 2012).

² *Early Care and Education: Background and Funding*, Lynch, K.E. and McCallion, G., Congressional Research Service (Washington, DC: June 23, 2015)

Despite the many children who benefit from these programs and investments, many more eligible children cannot be served with the current funding levels. For example:

- There were 14.2 million children potentially eligible for assistance under the Child Care and Development Block Grant in the average month in 2012.³ The average number of children receiving federal child care assistance through CCDF each month in 2012 was only 10 percent of those eligible, or 1.5 million.^{4,5}
- Only four percent of income-eligible infants and toddlers are receiving Early Head Start services and only 40 percent of income eligible preschool-aged children are enrolled in Head Start.⁶

We highlight the Administration's proposal to close these gaps in access and quality as well as descriptions of the ongoing efforts within and among federal agencies to reduce fragmentation and promote coordination at every level.

We welcome any questions you may have about this report and its recommendations.

³ Estimates of Child Care Eligibility and Receipt for Fiscal Year 2012. November 18, 2015. U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, available at <https://aspe.hhs.gov/pdf-report/estimates-child-care-eligibility-and-receipt-fiscal-year-2012>

⁴ The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) is authorized by the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act and Section 418 of the Social Security Act. CCDF is the combination of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) discretionary funding and mandatory funds. FY2013 numbers are from: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/occ/resource/fy-2013-ccdf-data-tables-final>

⁵ Child Care and Development Fund Statistics, available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/occ/resource/ccdf-statistics>

⁶ The estimates of income eligible children served include those at or below 100 percent of the poverty line according to 2010 Current Population Survey. These estimates do not factor in other eligibility criterion, including children in foster care or experiencing homelessness, as well as children who may be eligible under the Head Start Act's authority to serve up to 10 percent of children above the percent line and an additional 35 percent of children whose families earn 100 to 130 percent of the federal poverty line.