

Implementing the child care and development block grant reauthorization: A guide for states ^[1]

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Full report (pdf) ^[2]

Introduction

In November 2014, Congress reauthorized the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), the major federal child care program, for the first time since 1996. This reauthorization presents a promising opportunity for states to help families access safe, reliable, affordable child care that allows parents to work and promotes children's healthy growth and development. The legislation includes critical provisions to ensure the health and safety of children in child care settings, improve the quality of care, and make it easier for families to get and keep child care assistance—strengthening its dual roles as both a major early childhood education program and a work support for low-income families. By giving states more flexibility to structure policies around the needs of children and families, the reauthorization also makes it easier to link the child care assistance program to other programs, including other early childhood education programs and additional supports for families.

To take advantage of the opportunity offered by the reauthorization, and fulfill the goals of the legislation, states will need to be strategic and thoughtful about implementation, including paying careful attention to resources. States should:

- Determine their broader goals in implementing the new law;
- Identify the full set of changes they need to make to their current policies to meet those goals; and
- Assess the financial and other resources necessary to overcome the gap between their current policies and their goals for the implementation.

A piecemeal approach to implementation that lacks a clear vision could result in policy decisions that do not add up to meaningful change for families—or worse, could result in states making tradeoffs that harm families by, for example shifting resources to comply with the law in a way that causes children and their families to lose child care assistance. This guide suggests strategies for maximizing the opportunities presented by the law and minimizing negative consequences. In addition, the guide demonstrates how additional resources can enable states to realize the full potential of the law for helping children and families.

What the Research Says: How an Improved CCDBG Can Help Both Children and Parents

The reauthorized CCDBG recognizes that child care is a two-generation support and advances the dual goals of child care assistance and child care itself: supporting parents' work and promoting children's healthy development. Child care assistance helps parents afford reliable child care, which can help them gain and maintain stable employment; for example, one study found that single mothers of young children who received child care assistance were 39 percent more likely to still be employed after two years than those who did not receive any help paying for child care. Research also demonstrates the importance of high-quality child care to children's development: studies have shown that children who have attended high-quality care perform better on tests of cognitive skills, language ability, vocabulary, mathematical ability, memory and attention, and social skills.

These two goals—helping parents work and promoting children's well-being—are interrelated. When parents are able to work and earn a steady income, they can offer their children more stability, opportunities, and resources. Families can live in better neighborhoods with better schools, provide nutritious meals, and buy books and toys that allow their children to learn and explore. And when parents have peace of mind that their children are in childcare that offers a safe, nurturing environment, they are more likely to be productive at work, and thus more likely to stay employed and possibly even advance to a position with higher pay.

As states implement the reauthorization law, their policy decisions should be centered around these two important and complementary goals of supporting parents' ability to work and promoting child well-being.

New Opportunities

The new CCDBG law recognizes the need for a new vision of child care in the United States: one in which all children have access to higher-quality child care, and one in which parents seeking help to pay for child care face fewer barriers.

Key provisions in the new law support the following objectives:

- Protecting the health and safety of children in care through more consistent standards and monitoring of standards.
- Improving the quality of care, including through increased supports for child care providers.
- Enabling families to more easily access child care assistance that supports stable and continuous care and that can be coordinated with other programs

As states undertake the policy changes necessary to achieve the above objectives through these and other strategies included in the new law, state leaders and agencies should also take the opportunity to reexamine and systematically revise their administrative rules and procedures to ensure they effectively serve children and families. States should consider where they can reduce or eliminate unnecessary complexity in administrative policies and practices that create burdens for families and agencies. States should examine how they can use data, technology, staff training, and other approaches and tools to improve the way they administer their child care assistance programs. In a number of states, administrators and policymakers have already made significant strides creating systems that are more family-friendly, more efficient, and more accountable; going forward, states will be able to build on this progress and learn from one another as they improve administration of their programs.

New Challenges

The reauthorization also entails new challenges-and new costs-for states as they work to comply with the law's new requirements. The law's objectives of raising health and safety standards for all children receiving CCDBG-funded child care and increasing the quality of care are essential for the well-being of children, especially the most vulnerable children. Yet states need to find a way to attain these objectives without diverting resources from other essential areas, such as maintaining families' access to child care assistance. As states weigh tradeoffs, they should always keep in mind the ultimate goals of the law: advancing children's healthy development and learning and promoting families' economic security and success, both of which are critical to our broader national prosperity.

While states will be positioned differently with respect to the extent of policy changes needed to comply with the law, all states will face some new costs, and in many states these costs will be substantial. Yet, unlike the past two reauthorizations in 1990 and 1996, this law was not accompanied with a guarantee of significant new federal funds. While Congress recognized that some additional resources were needed to implement the law, it only increased the authorization levels for discretionary CCDBG funding (the funding specified each year in the annual appropriations measure) by 16 percent over six years, an increase of less than \$400 million above total funding for the same period at the fiscal year 2014(prereauthorization) funding level. Moreover, these funds are not guaranteed and must be allocated by Congress each year. The law does not increase the mandatory portion of CCDBG funding. States are also required to contribute funding in the form of state matching and maintenance-of-effort funds.

The absence of new resources to implement the law raises the possibility that states could make tradeoffs that will undermine the very goals of the reauthorization. States should work to prevent such outcomes-and in particular, they should avoid reducing the number of children receiving child care assistance. Already, the number of children receiving assistance has declined significantly. In 2013, CCDBG served the smallest number of children since 1998. Since 2006 alone, an estimated 315,000 children have lost child care assistance. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) estimated that only one in six children eligible under federal eligibility rules actually received assistance in 2011, even before additional children lost subsidies from 2011 to 2013. Further declines would deprive more families of the help they need, with negative consequences for their children; parents without access to child care assistance are forced to choose among difficult options in order to work, often leaving their children in unsafe settings.

States should also be extremely cautious about diverting resources from areas essential to child care quality, such as professional development for child care providers and provider payment rates. Research demonstrates that high-quality interactions between providers and children are critical to children's well-being-and the providers' understanding of child development and effective teaching strategies necessary to produce those interactions requires both professional development and ongoing support. If states shortchange investments in educating the child care workforce, providers will lack the knowledge and skills they need to offer a high-quality learning experience for children in their care. If states lower payment rates, maintain them at inadequate levels, or increase provider licensing or other fees, child care programs will lack the resources to offer salaries sufficient to attract and retain qualified staff. Failing to support child care providers adequately also has a negative impact on the providers themselves, most of whom are women and many of whom are struggling to support their own families.

For states to comply fully with the new requirements of the reauthorization while avoiding tradeoffs that harm children and families-and the child care providers who serve them-it will be essential for policymakers to appropriate significant new federal and state resources.

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: affordability ^[4]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> ^[7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/accessibility>