

Early childhood education gets push from \$1 billion federal investment^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Early education across the United States is a mishmash of day care, Head Start and preschool programs with a wide range of quality and effectiveness. But a federally sponsored program in 20 states has been effective at giving those states a way to assess and quantify early-childhood education options and make that information available to parents, educators and legislators, according to a study the U.S. Education Department plans to release Monday.

The report looks at data from the 20 states that received more than \$1 billion in federal aid to make quality education accessible to high-needs preschool children — those from low-income families or those in need of special assistance, including children with disabilities or developmental delays. The funding, the study says, has rapidly improved the quality of learning for the students while simultaneously enrolling a significant number of new students in top-tier programs.

It also has allowed health screenings for thousands of preschoolers to help identify and treat medical and developmental issues earlier, including ones that might have affected their ability to learn.

“The individual and collective progress of the 20 Early Learning Challenge States is changing the early childhood landscape for the better,” Linda Smith, deputy assistant secretary for early childhood development at the Administration for Children and Families, part of the Department of Health and Human Services, said in a statement. “It is exciting to watch these states make meaningful improvements as they tackle common and state-specific challenges and share lessons learned.”

States taking part in the program have created Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement Systems that evaluate the individual day-care and preschool programs and create a measurement system so that parents can have more information when choosing a school for their children. Nearly 267,000 children with high needs are now enrolled in the highest-quality state preschool programs, according to the report. That’s a 263 percent increase since the grants were first issued.

Numerous studies have shown that children who receive a high-quality early education are more likely to succeed economically and socially. It is particularly a boon to high-needs students, giving them a leg up in future educational achievement.

“Because of historic investments from the Obama Administration, states and cities, more children — particularly those who have been historically underserved — now have access to high-quality early learning,” Education Secretary John B. King Jr. said in a statement. “We must continue our collective work so that all children have the foundation they need to thrive in school and beyond.”

King plans to travel to Denver on Monday and to Wilmington, Del., on Tuesday to meet with local and state officials about how to make such opportunities available to all students.

Colorado and Delaware are among the 20 states that received more than \$1 billion in federal Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grants to bolster the quality of early learning education and to make it more widely available. The grants, authorized by Congress in 2011, are jointly administered by the Education Department and the Department of Health and Human Services.

States have used their allocations in a variety of ways to address early-childhood education needs.

California community colleges and universities created shared coursework to help lower the cost of attaining a bachelor’s degree in early-childhood education, a move that gave students an incentive to pursue a career in the field. Colorado began a statewide program of credentials and degrees for early childhood professionals. And Delaware created a new state agency dedicated exclusively to early childhood learning.

President Obama’s proposed 2017 budget includes \$75 billion over 10 years for Preschool for All, a program that would provide universal high-quality preschool for all 4-year-olds from moderate and low-income families.

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