

# Expanding High-Quality Child Care for Infants & Toddlers

Lessons from Implementation of Early Head Start – Child Care  
Partnerships in States



# Executive Summary

Access to high-quality early childhood education is essential to the future success of our youngest learners and their families, especially working families earning low wages and living in underserved communities. In our country, however, the majority of the nearly 5 million children under the age of 5 living in families with earnings below the poverty level do not have access to experiences that promote their healthy development and learning. Scientific research shows that relationships with adult caregivers build a foundation of neural connections in the brain by age 3, and this foundation has lifelong implications for health, education and other social outcomes. The current state of child care in this country means many young children are losing the opportunity to thrive before they even reach kindergarten.

## Where We Started

Two federal programs had the potential to increase access to high-quality early learning and development programs but did not reach all potentially eligible children – Early Head Start (EHS) and the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). Of the two programs, EHS was the only federally-funded early learning and development program specifically designed for families with very young children and earnings at or below the federal poverty level. In 2014, EHS funded 107,393 slots – or only approximately 4% of eligible children under age 3.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, CCDBG, which is used by states to help working families with low incomes pay for child care, served an average of 1.4 million children a month in 2014, one third of whom were infants and toddlers.<sup>2</sup> While CCDBG helped many families with low incomes offset the cost of child care, it reached just 15% of federally eligible children.<sup>3</sup> The grant had not been updated in decades, and fewer than 400,000 children from birth to age 3 were receiving CCDBG-funded

child care in an average month – 22% fewer children than in 2006 due to declining federal and state investments.<sup>4</sup> As a result, there was wide disparity in access, affordability and quality of early learning and development services and systems in states and communities across the country.

In 2014, Congress deliberated about how to address these challenges. Considering all factors, Congress appropriated \$500 million to expand access to EHS, which included the creation of a new Early Head Start – Child Care Partnerships program (Partnerships). The new program made funds available to local and state-level grantees to support expanded access to high-quality, full-year early child care and education services for infants and toddlers whose families are working but earning wages below the federal poverty level.

Late in 2014, Congress made additional sweeping changes to the CCDBG law, requiring states to make child care subsidy programs more family-friendly. The law also gradually increased the percentage of funds that state grantees could spend on quality improvement activities, created

## Child Care for Children Under Age 3 is Especially Difficult for Families to Afford

- Of the 12 million children under age 3 in the United States, nearly 25% live in a family with earnings below the federal poverty level.
- The average price of infant and toddler child care in a center is more than in-state public college tuition and fees in 28 states and the District of Columbia (D.C.).
- Families who earn incomes at the median level in their state would need to spend 18% of their earnings to cover the cost of child care for an infant and 13% for a toddler in a child care center.

a new set-aside to increase supply of high-quality infant and toddler child care and included provisions to improve timeliness and accuracy in how states pay child care providers.

One state leader described these moves, particularly the Partnerships program and the bipartisan reauthorization of CCDBG in 2014, as “a perfect storm.” For the first time, states were encouraged to bring together two major federal programs to support early care and development – both fostering systemic improvements on behalf of babies and toddlers.

As of 2017, federal data shows that the Partnerships initiative had funded 32,000 EHS slots for infants and toddlers, supported professional development of 8,000 early educators, and partnered with 1,400 child care centers and 1,000 family child care programs.<sup>5</sup>

## Where are We Now?

In the five years since Congress’ noteworthy changes, how has the implementation of Partnerships informed state goals and policies to improve access to high-quality infant and toddler care for low-income families?

Additionally, how have policies and practices been influenced on the ground at the state level – above and beyond the specific changes stipulated by the legislative revisions?

To find out, the Ounce of Prevention Fund (the Ounce), an organization focused on providing access to high-quality early childhood education and care to children and families, conducted interviews with a variety of state leaders. Interviewees included those who administer a Partnerships grant (Alabama, D.C. and Georgia), and some who supported implementation of Partnerships in their states but did not have a Partnerships grant (Louisiana, Maryland, Oklahoma and Washington).

## What We Learned

In general, the Ounce found that state leaders did, in fact, make important policy reforms to support child care partners to be successful EHS providers and to provide stable access to quality care for children and families served in Partnerships. Strikingly, state leaders who the Ounce interviewed made positive changes whether they had a federal grant at the state level or not. Changes made on behalf of Partnerships also helped states fine-tune policies that were later implemented statewide, providing pathways to raise the quality of infant and toddler child care.

2014

- \$500 million appropriation to Head Start
- Partnerships program established
- Extensive changes to the CCDBG law

2016

- The Office of Child Care finalizes regulations implementing changes to the CCDBG law
- The Office of Head Start revises and updates the Head Start Program Performance Standards

2018

- Congress approves a historic increase in CCDBG funding by adding \$2.37 billion, which states can use to implement reauthorization and expand access to high-quality care for more children and families
- Congress increases funds for Partnerships by \$150 million

2019

- Congress approves another \$50 million increase in CCDBG funding

Additionally, the Ounce learned that these policy changes and the implementation of Partnerships had many ripple effects well beyond the clear benefits to children, families and child care providers involved in the Partnerships. As the result of Partnerships, states have:

- **Leveraged multiple funding sources** and state systems in new ways to support local program success and quality.
- **Supported continuity of care without interruptions** for infants and toddlers in working families with low incomes.
- **Raised the bar** for what quality infant and toddler child care could and should be.
- **Created higher education pathways** to build new skills and competencies for the infant and toddler workforce.
- **Piloted reforms that were ultimately scaled statewide** to improve care for many more infants and toddlers.

State leaders also reported that the EHS and child care sectors now know more about each other's programs and come together more regularly to better serve our youngest children and families. What's more, supporting the Partnerships and learning what it takes to successfully implement the Head Start Program Performance Standards in home- and center-based child care sites has shifted thinking among state early childhood system administrators. Administrators now actively think about how to change policies and systems and the funding that is necessary to incentivize and achieve quality improvement in child care settings.

## Where Can We Go From Here?

### Implications for Federal and State Policymakers

The establishment of the Partnerships program and the reforms Congress enacted through the CCDBG reauthorization encouraged state and local innovation to address the disparities associated with access to quality child care for working families in underserved communities. New funding provided by Congress since 2014 has continued to fuel this trend.

Overall, state leaders interviewed for this paper were enthusiastic about the significance of the Partnerships experience for the state and the possibilities for providing quality education and care to more young children. Congress and other federal leaders had a clear vision to spur innovation and increase access to high-quality child care and education at the local and state levels, which has been achieved by dedicated state and education leaders around the country through the Partnerships. Many stakeholders' work on the Partnerships have provided an inspirational pathway that, with more resources, could raise the overall quality of child care in the country for babies and toddlers in working families. Indeed, the combined efforts of Congress and state leaders have laid a strong foundation for continued innovation in expanding access to high-quality early childhood education. The progress-to-date is only the beginning of what is possible. The results of the Ounce's study suggest that, moving forward, there are myriad opportunities for federal and state leaders to build on this foundation of established Partnerships to secure bright futures for many more young children across the country.

# Endnotes

- 1 Mohan, A., and Walker, C. (2016).** *Early Head Start Participants, Programs, Families, and Staff in 2014*. CLASP. <https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/publications/2017/04/EHS-2014-Fact-Sheet-.pdf>
- 2 Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.**
- 3 Chien, N. (2017).** *Factsheet: Estimates of Child Care Eligibility & Receipt for Fiscal Year 2013*. Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/258491/ChildCareSubsidyEligibility.pdf>
- 4 CLASP and Zero to Three (2017).** *Child Care Assistance: A Critical Support for Infants, Toddlers, and Families*. <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/2066-child-care-assistance-a-critical-support-for-infants-toddlers-and-families>
- 5 Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2017).** *Early Head Start–Child Care Partnerships: Growing the Supply of Early Learning Opportunities for More Infants and Toddlers*. [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecd/ehs\\_ccp\\_brochure.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecd/ehs_ccp_brochure.pdf)



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