



# A New Approach to Policy

## The Case for Strengthening Organizational Conditions to Improve Early Childhood Care and Education Quality

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This brief outlines policy<sup>†</sup> approaches that have the potential to strengthen the organizational conditions of early care and education (ECE) programs as a means to quality improvement. Our ultimate goal is to enhance the ability of *all* ECE programs to support young children’s learning and development by improving the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms. Evidence shows that children learn more in high-quality classrooms, yet recent research has illuminated the limitations of current policy approaches to strengthening classroom practice.<sup>1</sup>

- ▶ In this brief, we propose a new approach: Advocating for and implementing policies aimed at improving the organizational conditions of ECE programs as a means to stimulate quality improvement at the classroom level.





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## Classroom Quality is Critical for Children's Development

Decades of research have shown that the quality of teaching and learning in ECE classrooms is critical for supporting children's learning outcomes across domains of development.<sup>2</sup> But creating and maintaining high levels of quality in a classroom is not easy: even the best teachers require a great deal of knowledge, experience, and ongoing professional support and peer collaboration to do so successfully, consistently, and equitably.<sup>3</sup>

- ▶ **This means that when improvement is the goal, we must concern ourselves not only with the conditions that support children's development, but with the conditions that support teachers' development as well.**

## Organizational Conditions are Critical for Teachers' Development

Groundbreaking longitudinal research has identified organizational conditions that distinguish schools that improved over time from those in which student achievement stagnated. Improving schools requires coherent, orchestrated action across "Five Essential Supports": effective leadership, collaborative teachers, engaged families, supportive environments, and ambitious instruction.<sup>4</sup>

- ▶ **In particular, school leadership is theorized to be the "driving force," and teacher collaboration the "primary vehicle" for sustained professional learning and quality improvement.<sup>5</sup>**

## A New Approach:

### Targeting Organizational Conditions and Improvement

Despite convincing research evidence of the importance of these organizational conditions for supporting the complex dynamics that lead to both teachers' development (i.e., quality improvement) and children's development,<sup>6</sup> most early childhood policies and regulations still do not adequately address them.<sup>7</sup>

- ▶ **Policies that aim to improve ECE quality and children's development should more intentionally focus on supporting programs' organizational conditions by directly supporting leaders' and teachers' capacity and ability to create and engage in collaboration and cycles of continuous improvement.**

A comprehensive approach to improving policy to support organizational conditions includes three distinct strategies:



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1

Change how leaders and teachers are prepared through policies and incentives that target teacher and leader qualifications and experiences, including:

- a. Foundational and specialized competencies
- b. Preparatory programs (pre-service)
- c. Residency programs (pre-service)
- d. Certification

2

Change how leaders and teachers are supported by the systems and resources provided or made possible by an entity external to an individual program (e.g., at the federal, state, or district level), including:

- a. Adequate and equitable pay commensurate with qualifications
- b. Continuing professional development requirements (in-service)
- c. Professional development provider or coaching competencies and qualifications
- d. Resource allocation

3

Change what leaders and teachers are expected to do and focus on in their roles through regulations and standards that target the quality of program-level organizational conditions, including:

- a. Job-embedded professional development
- b. Data-informed decision-making
- c. Reflective supervision
- d. Collaborative planning
- e. Peer learning communities

Any of these policies can work either by clearing obstacles to building strong organizational conditions (e.g., allowing for professional development units or course credit to be awarded for participation in job-embedded professional development activities), or by increasing programs' capacity and incentives to do this work (e.g., through funding formulas that support teachers' out-of-classroom, collaboration time). Quality rating and improvement systems represent a particularly important opportunity to codify these strategies; doing so sends a clear message about how quality is defined and the kinds of practices that are expected, as well as incentivizes programs to focus on the right improvements.

- ▶ **To be successful, it is critical that these strategies be reflected not only in written policies, but also in the systems, funding, and resources that can ensure that those policies are implemented fully, effectively, and equitably.**



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## References

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† We define “policy” as including any decisions that are made at a level higher than an individual early childhood program—including but not limited to federal and state agencies and school districts. Early childhood programs also enact and implement policies, but these policies are not the focus of the recommendations in this brief.

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<sup>4</sup> Bryk, A. (2010). “Organizing Schools for Improvement.” *Phi Delta Kappan*, 91(7), 23–30.; Bryk, A., Sebring, P., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., and Easton, J. (2010). *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.; Ehrlich, S.B., Pacchiano, D.M., Stein, A.G., & Luppescu, S. (2016). *Essential organizational supports for early education: The development of a new survey tool to measure organizational conditions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research and the Ounce of Prevention Fund, p.6-7.

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<sup>6</sup> Bryk et al. (2010).

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