



Leveraging ESSA Plans in Preschool Development Grant Implementation: *Guidance and Recommendations*

THE COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a nonpartisan, nationwide, nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, Bureau of Indian Education, and five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions. CCSSO provides leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance on major educational issues. The Council seeks member consensus on major educational issues and expresses their views to civic and professional organizations, federal agencies, Congress, and the public.

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We are grateful to our partners at **Foresight Law + Policy Advisors, particularly Elliot Regenstein**, for their support in developing this guide.

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CONTENTS

Overview	2
I. The PDG Needs Assessment and Strategic Planning Processes	3
II. Overview of Early Childhood Strategies in ESSA Plans.....	7
A. <i>The State’s Vision for Education</i>	8
B. <i>Family Engagement and Coordination</i>	9
C. <i>Accountability and School Improvement</i>	11
D. <i>Professional Development</i>	12
E. <i>Focused Funding Streams</i>	14
III. Strategic Plan Implementation Toolkit	15
IV. Conclusion	17
V. Resources for Use in the Planning Process.....	18

OVERVIEW

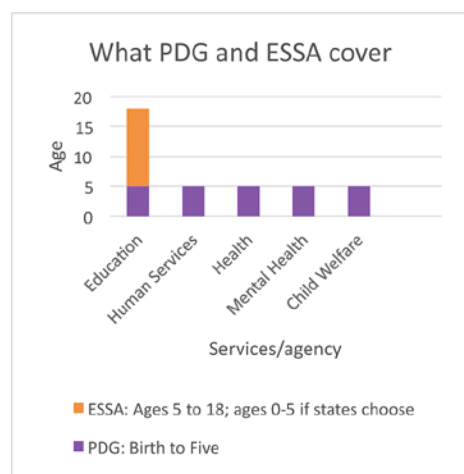
In 2019, 46 states and territories are implementing Preschool Development Grants (PDGs), which will support states to do five broadly defined activities:

1. A Birth to Five Needs Assessment
2. A Birth to Five Strategic Plan
3. Maximizing Parent Knowledge and Choice
4. Sharing Best Practices
5. Improving Overall Quality

The primary focus of the grants will be on the needs assessment and strategic planning processes. Through the needs assessment, states will identify some of their biggest challenges in birth to five policy; through the strategic plan, states will propose an approach to addressing those challenges and to increasing the number of children with access to high-quality services. Importantly, the PDGs give states broad flexibility in both defining the most important problems to solve and in choosing solutions targeted to solving them. The PDGs are an opportunity for states to think big, to generate an honest accounting of where they are and where they want to go, and to pursue more equitable systems that promote high-quality early childhood education programs for all students.

As with all early childhood policy, the PDG will need to cut across multiple agencies; even though the grant focuses on “early childhood care and education,” early childhood work also connects to health, mental health, child welfare, and other state systems. States have varying governance structures for early childhood education and care and for related services that also impact young children.¹ Multiple agencies will therefore need to be involved in the PDG needs assessment and strategic planning processes.

In addition to promoting coherence across multiple agencies, the PDG needs assessment and strategic plan should also be aligned with the important work of the K-12 education system—which



will enroll the vast majority of children receiving publicly funded early childhood care and education. In pursuing alignment, states should leverage work already done by state education agencies (SEAs) in developing the state education plans required under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)—and lay the groundwork for influencing future versions of state ESSA plans.² This toolkit is designed to help states with that process.

An important commonality between the PDG and the ESSA planning process is an emphasis on stakeholder engagement. The development of PDG strategic plans

1 A Framework for Choosing a State-Level Early Childhood Governance System.

2 Some states may have other important documents guiding their K-12 policy, such as a strategic plan; where applicable, states should also use PDG to influence those documents.

should bring together leaders from a wide cross-section of the early childhood system, including parents, providers from multiple program settings, and policy leaders; the involvement of schools is also essential given the crucial role they play in early childhood. Ideally, leaders from K-12 and higher education who participated directly in the state’s ESSA plan can also be part of the PDG strategic plan development, which will help create continuity of ideas between the two processes.

Another important commonality between PDG and ESSA is an emphasis on the whole child and not just on “academic” learning. In PDG, the definition of “early childhood care and education programs” includes programs that focus on social, emotional, and physical development—and the term “services” is defined to include services focused on those needs.³ In their ESSA plans, states are developing approaches that go beyond reading and math and are looking for ways to address social-emotional learning and conditions of learning such as mental health, nutrition, and family support needs.⁴

Every state has now had its initial ESSA plan approved, but those plans will not be static—the U.S. Department of Education expects states to update them over time.⁵ In many states, early childhood leaders were involved in the ESSA planning process, and as states consider the evolution of their plans, early childhood should play a prominent role. The timelines for updating state ESSA plans will vary—some states will make revisions in 2019, while others may hold off until 2020 or later. In addition states must request and receive approval from the U.S. Department of Education for all revisions—but whatever the state’s timeline, the PDG can influence the next iteration of the ESSA plan.⁶

This brief starts by discussing the requirements of the PDG needs assessment and strategic planning process. It then reviews the requirements of ESSA, with some highlights of where early childhood has been or could be a meaningful part of state plans. Following that is a toolkit states can use to ensure that they are harmonizing their PDG strategic plan with their ESSA plan and setting the table for future versions of the ESSA plan to be even stronger on early childhood issues. It concludes by identifying some additional resources that states may find valuable in the process.

I. THE PDG NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESSES

The PDG needs assessment and strategic planning processes share some important commonalities—particularly with regard to when they will occur, how they draw on previous work by the state, and who needs to be involved. The differences are primarily in the content covered—and while they are different from each other, they are clearly meant to be interconnected.

3 Preschool Development Grant Birth through 5 Application. https://ami.grantsolutions.gov/files/HHS-2018-ACF-OCC-TP-1379_3.pdf, pages 7 and 8.

4 *Social and Emotional Learning and Development, Conditions for Learning, and Whole Child Supports in ESSA State Plans; How the Every Student Succeeds Act Can Support Social and Emotional Learning, Encouraging Social and Emotional Learning.* .

5 Department of Education letter to state chiefs regarding ESSA amendment process. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/dclassamendmentprocessltr.pdf>.

6 In states that were not awarded a PDG, this toolkit could still be useful for considering potential updates to the ESSA plan that improve policy continuity between early learning and K-12.

When They Will Occur: By July 2019, the needs assessment and strategic planning processes are well underway in most states. PDGs are one-year grants, so all activities funded by the grant need to be completed during calendar year 2019. The needs assessment and strategic plan are particularly urgent because the grant activities from the “Improving Overall Quality” category cannot start until the needs assessment and strategic plan are completed.

How They Draw on the State’s Previous Work: One requirement of the PDG application was that states must design needs assessment and strategic planning processes that draw on previous policy work, such as ESSA planning, including previous needs assessments and strategic plans. The strategic plan is required to reference other early childhood care and education plans—including those of the State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care (required under the Head Start Act) or plans under the Child Care and Development Block Grant. The PDG strategic plan must also describe how it will build on existing state and program plans to “improve coordination and collaboration among its programs, better serve children and families in existing programs, and increase the overall participation of children in the State in high-quality early childhood care and education programs and services in a mixed delivery system.”⁷

While the state’s ESSA plan is not specifically referenced in the PDG Funding Opportunity Announcement,⁸ the PDG is clearly meant to build on the work the state has already done. And if the state ESSA plan is not already a plan that improves coordination, increases overall participation, and improves service to children in early education and care programs, then the PDG strategic plan should look at how that could be accomplished.

Who Needs to Be Involved: States were encouraged to develop their PDG applications with a wide range of early childhood care and education stakeholders—and the needs assessment and strategic planning processes should be similarly inclusive. This input should include at least the following:

- Parents and families, including custodial and noncustodial parents, and/or parent council or association representatives;
- Early childhood care and education stakeholders, including community partners, advocacy organizations, think tanks, philanthropic organizations, and business or public/private partners, and state and local early learning councils, if applicable;
- Program directors and staff across child-serving agencies and programs, including preschool and K-12 school districts, Medicaid/CHIP, Head Start, child care, special education and early intervention, health, mental health, and child welfare; and
- Representatives of Indian tribes, tribal organizations, and urban Indian organizations within the state.

7 Preschool Development Grant Birth through 5 Application, page 28. https://ami.grantsolutions.gov/files/HHS-2018-ACF-OCC-TP-1379_3.pdf.

8 Preschool Development Grant Birth through 5 Application. https://ami.grantsolutions.gov/files/HHS-2018-ACF-OCC-TP-1379_3.pdf.

This list is meant to be a starting point, and states are encouraged to expand beyond it. The Council of Chief State School Officers has a library of resources focused on stakeholder engagement that states can use in this process.⁹

The processes are also expected to include the State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care, which is required under the Head Start Act. Federal law requires that the council include leaders from multiple state agencies, providers, families, and other leaders from the field; indeed, the council should include representatives from all of the categories of stakeholders specifically named in the PDG application.¹⁰ Federal law charges the councils with making recommendations on a range of early childhood topics, and governors can ask them to address additional topics if they choose. While the council can play a valuable role in the PDG strategic planning process, broad engagement will require opening the process to many people in the field who do not sit on the council.

Several K-12 and early learning system roles can serve as points of connection between the PDG processes and the ESSA plan process. As noted, the PDG requires the involvement of early learning program directors from K-12 school districts; if any program directors were involved in the ESSA process, they can be a valuable resource under PDG. The State Advisory Council is also a key junction point, as the council by law must include a representative of the SEA and a representative of local education agencies (LEAs).¹¹ In some states, the council representatives from the SEA and LEAs were personally involved in the state's ESSA planning, and in others, they deferred to colleagues—but in every state they can play a key role in bridging the conversations.

While the SEA must submit the state's ESSA plan after review by the governor, under PDG, the governor had the flexibility to designate the lead agency applicant during the application process. In 17 grantee states, the SEA is the designated agency lead.¹² In those states, the SEA will have a clearer leadership role in ensuring alignment between the PDG strategic plan and the ESSA state plan; in other states, interagency collaboration will be needed to create coherence among the plans. The governor's office should also play a part in harmonizing the two plans, and states should also seek opportunities to actively involve state legislators in both processes.

What the PDG Needs Assessment and Strategic Plan Are Expected to Cover

While the processes for the PDG needs assessment and strategic plan will be carried out together, the content of the reports will have to be different. The needs assessment looks at the quality and availability of existing early learning programs, with a focus on access levels for the most vulnerable children; the strategic plan recommends collaboration, coordination, and improvement activities. But while their content will be different, they will cover many of the same topic areas.

9 The Resource Library is available at <https://ccsso.org/resource-library/topic/educator-and-stakeholder-engagement>.

10 State Advisory Councils.

11 42 USC 9837b(b)(1)(C)(ii),(iii). <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/hs-act-pl-110-134.pdf>.

12 Alaska, Arizona, California, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, Texas, and Virginia. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/resource/pdg-b-5-initiative>.

Needs Assessment	Strategic Plan
Describe how the state defines key terms, including quality early childhood care and education, availability, vulnerable or underserved, and children in rural areas.	
Describe the populations of children who are vulnerable or underserved, and children in rural areas.	States are encouraged to incorporate trauma-informed approaches to early childhood care and education to counter the impact of trauma and adverse childhood experiences, thereby increasing each child’s chances for success in kindergarten and beyond.
Identify the current quality and availability of early childhood care and education, including for vulnerable or underserved children and children in rural areas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe how the strategic plan will lead to better services for children and families in existing programs and how such activities will increase the overall participation of children in the state. • Recommend partnership, collaboration, coordination, and quality improvement activities and opportunities that can leverage existing resources to improve coordination, policy alignment, program quality, and service delivery across early childhood care and education programs in the B-5 Early Childhood State System, including activities to improve children’s transition from early childhood care and education programs into elementary schools.
Identify, to the extent practicable, the unduplicated number of children being served in existing programs and the unduplicated number of children awaiting service in such programs.	
	States are encouraged to consider how best to improve the training and experience of B-5 early childhood care and education providers in the state, as well as ongoing practice-based coaching and professional development needs of the early childhood care and education workforce in developing the state’s proposed approaches toward improving outcomes for children and families.
Identify gaps in data or research about the quality and availability of programming and supports for children birth through five, considering the needs of working families as well as those who are seeking employment or in job training; describe the state’s plan to fill these gaps in data or research to support collaboration between programs and services and maximize parental choice.	

Needs Assessment	Strategic Plan
Describe the state’s plan for developing and tracking measurable indicators of progress that align with the state’s vision and desired outcomes.	Describe how the state’s strategic plan will make use of indicator data to assess progress and to inform needed revisions to the plan over time, as well as to assess key desired outcomes related to delivery of services and achieved cost and resource efficiencies.
Describe the state’s plan for addressing ECE facilities and facility-related concerns.	
Include an analysis of barriers to the funding and provision of high-quality early childhood care and education services and supports, and identify opportunities for more efficient use of resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommend partnership opportunities among Head Start providers, LEAs, state and local governments, Indian tribes and tribal organizations, and private entities (including faith- and community-based entities) that would improve coordination, program quality, and delivery of services. • Include information that identifies opportunities for, and barriers to, collaboration and coordination among existing programs in the state, including among state, local, and tribal (if applicable) agencies responsible for administering such programs. • Incorporate new or updated federal, state, and local statutory requirements and identify barriers to the various levels of collaboration and coordination.
Address transition supports and gaps that affect how children move between early childhood care and education programs and school entry.	Recommend activities to improve children’s transition from early childhood care and education programs into elementary schools.

As discussed further in Section III, some of these areas have relatively direct connections to the required elements of state ESSA plans.

II. OVERVIEW OF EARLY CHILDHOOD STRATEGIES IN ESSA PLANS

ESSA plans represent an important articulation of a state’s approach to K-12 education. The PDG will address issues beyond education, but addressing alignment between K-12 education and early childhood education and care is an essential component of PDG needs assessments and strategic planning. That alignment cannot be developed without considering the state’s ESSA plan.

Many states have included early learning in their ESSA plans, as highlighted in the 2017 report *The State of Early Learning in ESSA: Plans and Opportunities for Implementation*.¹³ Where states have already talked about early learning in the ESSA plan, that language will provide a useful launching

¹³ Policy Brief: *The State of Early Learning in ESSA: Plans and Opportunities for Implementation*. https://www.ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2018-01/ESSA%20Early%20Learning%20Policy%20Brief-ver3_0.pdf. An additional report on this topic is the First Five Years Fund’s 2018 brief, *Early Learning in State ESSA Plans: Implementation Snapshot: How States Are Using the Law*. <https://www.ffyf.org/early-learning-state-essa-plans-states-using-law/>.

point for the work of the PDG. Where states have not done so, the ESSA plan is still an important point of reference because it describes the current state of K-12 policy—which necessarily must inform any alignment efforts.

While the existing ESSA plan is an essential resource to the PDG process, it should not be used to limit discussion of the state’s policy options. Every state is expected to eventually update its ESSA plans; in some states an update is imminent, whereas in others it is likely to be further in the future. But regardless of the state’s timeline, the work of PDG can inform those future ESSA updates.¹⁴ If the PDG needs assessment or strategic plan recommend changes to the ESSA plan, that should be made explicit in their narrative so that there is no confusion about what next steps are needed to implement those recommendations. Moreover, any recommended changes should be respectful of the initial ESSA plan and provide a thoughtful rationale for the proposed updates.

This section looks at all of the required elements of ESSA plans, with an eye toward how those elements can be connected to the PDG needs assessment and strategic planning processes.

A. *The State’s Vision for Education*

Just as the PDG requires states to articulate a vision for early childhood, the receipt of Title I funding—the largest funding stream under ESSA—requires states to develop a vision for at least K-12 education. But the ESSA vision can and should be broader than that. Some ways the ESSA plan should reflect a connection to early childhood include:

- *Goal-Setting.* States are required to set educational goals—how do those goals address the pre-kindergarten years? Has the state identified clear goals for kindergarten readiness or other goals that address the birth-to-five years? When the state strategic plan developed under PDG identifies indicators used to assess progress, how do those indicators align with indicators used in the ESSA plan?
- *Standards Alignment.* When states discuss the alignment of their learning standards, is that alignment K-12 or birth through 12? And does the state include domains beyond the core academic subjects to include important issues like social and emotional learning?
- *Assessment.* ESSA requires the use of assessments for accountability purposes, but what is the state’s overall approach to assessment—and how does that approach account for the early years? Is the state using a kindergarten entry assessment or other assessments to help understand how children are progressing prior to third grade, when required accountability assessment begins?
- *English Learners.* What is the state’s overall approach to English language learners? How is it providing services for children of all ages, with continuity from the pre-kindergarten years through the end of high school?
- *Students with Disabilities.* How is the state ensuring continuity for students from Part C infant-toddler services through Section 619 preschool services through K-12 services?

¹⁴ States should also look at whether there are any other plans within their P-20 system that might benefit from insights generated in the PDG needs assessment and strategic planning processes.

The overall plan may also address some of the more specific elements covered below, such as school improvement and professional development.

There are natural ways for the PDG needs assessment and strategic plan to build on or complement the ESSA plan:

- *Goals.* If the state’s ESSA plan does not set goals for the pre-kindergarten years, use the PDG to identify critical indicators for those years and then set targets for the state to meet.
- *Standards Alignment.* Use the PDG process to determine whether practitioners are experiencing the state’s learning standards as well-aligned from birth through third grade. If appropriate, use the findings to develop new implementation resources—or to inform a standards revision process.
- *Assessments.* Use the PDG process to discuss how formative assessments are conducted in the years prior to third grade and how the results are used. Consider whether different approaches to assessment might yield information that could be used to improve outcomes by parents, educators, and policymakers.
- *English Learners.* Determine what services are available for children prior to kindergarten entry and how their needs may be similar or different to those of school-aged children. Identify potential services that might lead to improved child and family experiences. Consider whether the state is collecting the data needed to truly understand the experiences of English learners.
- *Students with Disabilities.* Examine the experience of families receiving services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as they transition from Part C to Section 619, and consider how those experiences might be improved. Look at the collection of data under IDEA, and determine whether the state has all the information it needs to understand how its system is working.

Ideally, the state’s overall ESSA vision for education will include a robust discussion of the early childhood system. That will require the active participation of early childhood stakeholders in the planning process for any updates to the ESSA state plan. Regardless of whether that engagement has occurred in the past, it will be needed in the future—and can draw on the work of the PDG strategic planning process. Leaders of the PDG planning process should bring the results of their work to the ESSA plan revision process, and the SEA should engage those leaders in the articulation of the state’s vision.

B. Family Engagement and Coordination

ESSA Title I also includes requirements that districts engage with families and coordinate with early childhood providers. Both of these requirements are also reflected in the PDG, which expects state strategic plans to address these important activities.¹⁵

¹⁵ States should also consider the potential relationship of the PDG’s stakeholder engagement provisions with engagement requirements in other applicable federal laws, such as the IDEA.

- *Family Engagement.* Engaging with families is a critical priority of the PDG; not only is it an issue that can and should be addressed in the needs assessment and strategic plan, the PDG required states to propose projects focused on Maximizing Parent Knowledge and Choice (Activity 3). The state’s current ESSA plan will likely discuss the state’s approach to informing parents, and that approach should inform the work of the PDG.

Ideally, though, the PDG will substantially build out the state’s plans to engage parents in the early childhood years, and that work can then be incorporated back into the state’s ESSA plan. Early childhood care and education funding streams frequently include requirements for parent communication, and the PDG should examine the implementation of those to determine whether there are opportunities to improve in the birth-to-five years. The best practices from those years should then be considered for the K-12 years, with the state’s Title I report card providing one opportunity to report information about both early learning and K-12.¹⁶

- *Partnership with Early Childhood Providers.* The PDG requires states to address collaboration among early childhood providers—and early childhood providers with schools—in their strategic plan. As noted above, the strategic plan must address how the state will improve coordination across programs, including in the transition into kindergarten.
 - A major advance of ESSA was that it requires schools to coordinate with early childhood programs in their area. One goal of coordination under ESSA is to ensure that administrators and teachers have the information they need to provide continuity to children who were served by local early childhood programs.
 - The new ESSA requirement builds on a longstanding requirement in the Head Start Act that Head Start providers collaborate with their local school districts.
 - At the state level, the SEA is required to do a self-assessment, engage stakeholders, and support the creation of formal agreements.
 - LEAs are then required to undertake activities that support coordination.

In sum, the requirement to support partnerships among early childhood providers and schools is a prominent requirement of PDG and ESSA as well as the Head Start Act.¹⁷ The PDG process can help reconcile these requirements, with states developing coherent plans for collaboration by discussing what capacities are needed for collaboration to be successful and then designing support systems to facilitate those collaborations. While some early childhood providers and LEAs will be able to collaborate without outside help, many might benefit from well-designed supports that could ultimately be implemented as part of the state’s ESSA plan.

¹⁶ CCSSO—in partnership with the National Association for Family, School and Community Engagement; The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading; and the Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium—has created a network of 17 states working on Birth to Grade 12 Family Engagement Frameworks. See: <https://ccsso.org/topics/early-childhood-education>.

¹⁷ *New Early Childhood Coordination Requirements in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).*

C. Accountability and School Improvement

One of the major changes ESSA wrought was a reworking of how the federal government requires states to measure the quality of schools and then act on those measurements. Accountability and school improvement are at the heart of ESSA, but, historically, state accountability and school improvement policies have not made a strong connection to early childhood.¹⁸ The PDG strategic planning process should give states an opportunity to reflect on those policies and propose changes that could be implemented in future ESSA plans.

States are required by ESSA's accountability provisions to articulate a formula for measuring the quality of K-12 schools. For elementary schools, the majority of the rating will be based on standardized assessment results, with required assessments beginning in third grade.¹⁹ But ESSA allows states to use indicators that focus on a school's performance prior to third grade in areas other than assessment, and states can consider the potential benefits and drawbacks of those indicators.²⁰ For many states, these indicators could serve as a bridge between the indicators used to rate early childhood programs—frequently codified in state quality rating and improvement systems—and the assessment-based accountability of the later elementary years.

Importantly, there are ways to use indicators of quality in the early elementary years beyond the state's accountability formula. There are numerous restrictions on the kind of data states can use in that formula, and some of the indicators that are permitted might be ill-suited for inclusion for policy reasons. Some indicators might be more useful in public reporting, including on the school report cards required by ESSA.²¹ Louisiana is an example of a state that includes information about early childhood on its school report cards.²²

ESSA requires states to distribute funds for school improvement purposes. In designing a school improvement system, it is important to include a focus on early childhood because there is a limit on how much schools can do to catch up students who are behind.²³ The school improvement process requires a needs assessment, and the needs assessment process should require an exploration of where children are at school entry and what systems are serving them prior to kindergarten.²⁴ States can also ensure that school improvement focuses on early childhood by including the early years in metrics of whether or not the grant succeeded. Early childhood should also be a focus of the state's technical assistance to districts and schools using school improvement dollars.

The PDG is an excellent opportunity for the early childhood community to think about how it can connect better to K-12's accountability and school improvement infrastructure. Specific opportunities include:

18 *Why the K-12 World Hasn't Embraced Early Learning.*

19 *Valuing the Early Years in State Accountability Systems Under the Every Student Succeeds Act.*

20 *Birth to Grade 3 Indicator Framework.*

21 *Birth to Grade 3 Indicator Framework.* A full description of one state's effort to wrestle with these issues is the Illinois State Board of Education's ESSA P-2 Working Group Indicator Report.

22 Louisiana School Report Cards, <https://louisianaschools.com/>.

23 *Establishing Achievable Goals.*

24 *Understanding Federally Required Education Policy Needs Assessments and Maximizing Their Impact.*

- **Examining the definition of quality in early childhood care and education and seeing how it might be applied in K-12.** Are there measurements currently used in birth to five—such as in a quality rating and improvement system²⁵—that could be utilized in the ESSA context, either in the accountability formula or as a dashboard indicator?²⁶
- **Looking at the state’s approach to school improvement and evaluating whether or not it adequately takes account of early learning.** If it does not, the PDG strategic plan can recommend specific changes that would lead to a richer analysis of a school’s needs with a greater focus on the early years. This analysis should include the role of comprehensive services—such as health and mental health services—which can have a significant impact on a child’s ability to engage in school.
- **Considering the state’s approach to distributing early childhood funds and prioritizing community-level infrastructure.** Is the state taking into account the needs of K-12 schools when it determines how to allocate early childhood resources? In doing so, is it using available levers to make early childhood providers part of broader school improvement efforts?

States can gather feedback from stakeholders on these issues and formalize recommendations in the needs assessment and strategic plan. Those recommendations could cover specific changes to the ESSA plan or a process that considers what revisions might be appropriate.

D. Professional Development

Professional development is a critical focus of both the PDG and ESSA. Developing early childhood educators is fundamental to the success of the early childhood system.²⁷ Accordingly, the funds provided for professional development and educator recruitment and retention through ESSA’s Title II are an important resource that should be addressed by the PDG strategic planning process.

One important element of ESSA that may be unfamiliar to early childhood leaders is its taxonomy of evidence-based practices.²⁸ Evidence-based practices are those that demonstrate a statistically significant effect on outcomes based on:

- I. “Strong evidence from at least 1 well-designed and well-implemented experimental study;
- II. “Moderate evidence from at least 1 well-designed and well-implemented quasi-experimental study; or
- III. “Promising evidence from at least 1 well-designed and well-implemented correlational study with statistical controls for selection bias.”

In the absence of such evidence, states can use strategies that have “a rationale based on high-quality research findings or positive evaluation” that make it likely to work. The state’s Title II implementation strategy should be guided by this framework.

25 <https://qrisnetwork.org/>

26 *Birth to Grade 3 Indicator Framework: Opportunities to Integrate Early Childhood Education in ESSA Toolkit.*

27 *The State of Early Learning in ESSA: Plans and Opportunities for Implementation.*

28 Section 8101(21)(A).

In ESSA, early childhood is a permitted use of available professional development funds. Title II’s provisions are quite broad; states and districts have a great deal of discretion on how to use those funds.²⁹ One potential use is to create collaborative professional development opportunities between early childhood and K-12 teachers, which could include a focus on the transition into K-12. Head Start programs should also be involved in joint professional development.³⁰ In ESSA plans, states increasingly expressed an interest in focusing on the whole child and supporting social and emotional development, which is also a central focus of well-designed early childhood care and education.

Professional development should be a key building block of state PDG plans. The current status of the state’s early childhood professionals should be addressed in the needs assessment, and the strategic plan should lay out the state’s approach to increasing the number of skilled and well-supported professionals. Moreover, Activity 4 of the PDG is specifically focused on Sharing Best Practices, and states will be undertaking important projects focused on the following:

[H]ow best to improve the training and experience of B-5 early childhood care and education providers in the State, as well as ongoing practice-based coaching and professional development needs of the early childhood care and education workforce in developing the State’s proposed approaches toward improving outcomes for children and families.³¹

The PDG also represents an opportunity to think more broadly about advancing the early childhood profession.³² States may have initiatives underway to increase the number of teachers generally; increase the number of teachers meeting a specific need, such as bilingual teachers or teachers in rural areas; and/or increase the quality of teacher preparation. The PDG needs assessment can identify ways in which the state’s professional development system can be improved, and then the strategic plan—informed by the work of Activity 4—can be used to lay out a plan for implementing the needed improvements. The recommendations should also consider ESSA’s tiered evidence framework and work underway pursuant to Title II in ESSA.

Professional development for early childhood has already been included in some state ESSA plans. For example, Colorado’s plan discusses professional development for educators on child development, including the development and distribution of a “Kindergarten School Readiness Guide”; it discusses P-3 approaches to learning and the implementation of a state law focused on K-3 literacy. New Mexico’s ESSA plan discusses professional development needed for teachers on a range of topics, including social-emotional development and language essentials. Where state ESSA plans reference early childhood education without being as specific, the PDG can be used to flesh out specific goals and strategies that support the overall vision and mission of state ESSA plans.³³

29 *Early Learning in State ESSA Plans: Implementation Snapshot: How States are Using the Law.*

30 *New Early Childhood Coordination Requirements in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): A Toolkit for State and Local Education Agencies, Head Start Programs, and the Early Childhood Field.*

31 Preschool Development Grant Funding Opportunity Announcement.

32 *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation.*

33 *Early Learning in State ESSA Plans: How States Are Using the Law.*

Whatever work the state is already doing to improve the quality of teaching should be leveraged to improve early childhood teaching, and the PDG is an excellent opportunity to articulate the need for that connection—along with some specific steps that will help to advance the work. At least some of the ideas generated through the PDG process will be strong candidates for inclusion in the next iteration of state ESSA plans.

E. Focused Funding Streams

Much of the focus of discussion on ESSA relates to its requirements under Title I and Title II, but there are many other smaller sources of funding that make important contributions to state early childhood systems. Moreover, these funding streams contribute to state efforts to serve the most vulnerable or underserved populations—which the PDG emphasizes throughout its requirements.³⁴

- *Migrant Education Funds*: ESSA provides funds for the education of migrant children, which can be used for early childhood. Most states address this issue in their consolidated state plans.
- *Title III Programs for English Language Learners*: Under Title III, the U.S. Department of Education makes competitive grants focused on the needs of English language learners. These grants can support professional development focused on effective language instruction and/or coordinating activities and data-sharing.
- *Title IV*: Title IV of ESSA includes several programs that can be used for early childhood. For example, the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants can be used in three areas—Well Rounded Education, Safe and Healthy Students, and Effective Use of Technology—with early childhood a permitted use under each. Title IV also provides funds to create 21st Century Community Learning Centers that offer a wide range of academic enrichment and other programs and activities, and these too can be used for early childhood purposes. States are already taking advantage of these two grant programs for early childhood purposes.
- *Title VI Programs for American Indians, Native Hawaiians, and Alaska Natives*: Title VI Indian Education Grants can be used to support early childhood programs, but at this time no state appears to be doing so.
- *Services to Homeless Children Under the McKinney-Vento Act*: The McKinney-Vento Act is a federal law that supports services to the homeless, and ESSA updated the provisions of that act relating to the education of homeless children. ESSA requires states to articulate their plans for providing services to homeless children, and in doing so, most states specifically discuss the role of Head Start and/or publicly funded preschool.

All of these issues can be addressed in the state’s needs assessment and strategic plan. The state can identify needs in early childhood related to these funding streams and recommend strategies for addressing those needs that are eligible for these funding streams. Even if the state does not ultimately use these federal dollars to address those needs, identifying the birth to five needs can

³⁴ This section draws extensively on the 2018 First Five Years Fund report *Early Learning in State ESSA Plans: Implementation Snapshot: How States are Using the Law*.

help the state plan holistically; if the state uses other sources of money to address the issues raised by the needs assessment, it will still improve the alignment between early childhood and K-12 while increasing the odds for better child outcomes.

In addition to leveraging individual sources of funding, the PDG is an opportunity for states to think holistically about how all of their early childhood funding streams work together.³⁵ For example, Missouri has developed a process to consolidate federal funds into one fund supporting early childhood education services.³⁶ The Bipartisan Policy Center also released a report in December 2018 analyzing the efficiency of state early childhood oversight, with recommendations for actions states can take to bring stronger coherence at the state level.³⁷

III. STRATEGIC PLAN IMPLEMENTATION TOOLKIT

Putting it all together, there are multiple issues for which states have the opportunity to leverage the ESSA plan in the PDG process—and then, in turn, leverage the PDG process in the ESSA plan. The table below summarizes the issue areas and some of the opportunities they present. In each of these areas, the state should pay close attention to opportunities to increase equity; this includes setting targets focused on equity, supporting equity at the local level, providing resources to support equity and holding recipients accountable, and focusing on the needs of teachers and leaders in creating climates that support equity (including in social-emotional development).³⁸

Issue Area	Opportunity
Supporting family engagement	The state’s ESSA plan should talk about how schools are engaging families, including using family engagement as a strategy for connecting with early childhood providers and smoothing the kindergarten transition. The PDG strategic plan should discuss strategies for family engagement in the early years, and under Activity 4, states should implement specific efforts to support family knowledge and choice. The plans should include a focus on equity.
Setting goals that address the entire birth through high school continuum	The state’s ESSA goals define its ambitions for its education system. Those goals should include attention to the early years and the need for children to enter kindergarten positioned to succeed. The PDG strategic planning process will give states an opportunity to build out their ambitions for the early childhood portion of the education system, which should then be harmonized with the state’s overall goal during the next ESSA plan revision process. If the ESSA plan already includes significant attention to the early years, then its content should more heavily influence the results of the strategic planning process.

35 *Blending and Braiding Early Childhood Funding Streams Toolkit: Enhancing Financing for High-Quality Early Learning Programs.*

36 Missouri Department of Education. 2019. Blending and Braiding Webinar. NOTE: We could not get the link to work.

37 *Creating an Integrated Efficient Early Care and Education System to Support Children and Families: A State by State Analysis.* The Council of Chief State School Officers hosted a webinar on this subject: <https://ccsso.webex.com/ccsso/lr.php?RCID=8c875579e31f44959c33b956ffb37338>.

38 *States Leading for Equity; Equity Starts Early: How Chiefs Will Build High-Quality Early Education.*

Issue Area	Opportunity
Using indicator data to measure child outcomes	Under ESSA, the state has already defined a set of indicators used to measure outcomes for older children. The PDG will require states to create a set of indicators to measure outcomes for children birth through age 5. Ideally the PDG process will build on the ESSA process—but if the state’s early childhood leaders do not see the state’s ESSA indicators as useful to that work, they should develop their own best proposal and work to harmonize the indicators over time (including through any revision processes to the ESSA plan).
Developing a true continuum of program quality measures birth through high school	Under ESSA, the state has already defined a set of indicators that measure the quality of K-12 schools. Most states have already defined a set of indicators that measure the quality of early childhood programs, typically through a quality rating and improvement system. In the PDG, states should examine the relationship between the two, with a particular focus on the early elementary years. If there is a perceived disconnect, the PDG strategic plan can propose a way to address that, which could inform future ESSA plans.
Improving the quality of early childhood services	The PDG needs assessment should describe the landscape of currently available services, and the strategic plan should articulate how the state intends to increase the quality of its current offerings. Improvement should be measured through the continuum of program quality measures described above.
Improving access to early childhood services	The PDG needs assessment will help the state understand which children are receiving which services and how great the need is for more services (particularly infant-toddler services). The PDG strategic plan should articulate the state’s plan for increasing access and in so doing should reference any supporting language in the ESSA plan.
Serving populations with special needs	The ESSA plan will identify numerous ways in which the state is using federal funds to support populations that have specialized needs—for example, children entitled to services through the McKinney-Vento Act. Because the PDG requires a focus on vulnerable children, all of its elements—the needs assessment, strategic plan, and other activities—should address meeting those specialized needs.
Meeting the needs of English language learners	The ESSA plan will discuss how to meet the needs of English language learners in the state, which should include a discussion of early childhood. The PDG should address the state’s English language learner population throughout—in the needs assessment, strategic plan, and activities focused on parents and teachers.
Improving coordination among early childhood services	The PDG places a significant focus on the importance of coordination among early childhood programs. If the state’s ESSA plan references the issue, then the PDG process should draw on the work already done. If not, then the PDG represents a valuable opportunity to engage K-12 leaders in this conversation.
Strengthening the connection between early childhood and K-12, including through kindergarten transition	Kindergarten transitions and connecting K-12 schools to early childhood were a new area of emphasis in ESSA. While in some states this issue has been a key area of focus long before ESSA, in all states the PDG implementation process is a chance to build on past successes and chart a more ambitious course for the future. This must include a focus on Head Start, given the federal requirements for collaboration between school district and Head Start providers.

Issue Area	Opportunity
Improving the training and experience of birth to five professionals	ESSA funds for professional development can be used to support early childhood, and some states have chosen to do that. Professional development for early childhood teachers should not only be addressed in PDG needs assessments and strategic plans, but Activity 4 in the PDG requires states to support sharing best practices among early childhood educators.
Integrating professional development across early childhood and K-12	In addition to making early childhood professional development stronger on its own, ESSA provides opportunities to connect early childhood teachers to those in the K-12 system—which can lead to better teaching in both early childhood and K-12, along with smoother transitions for parents. State ESSA plans may address this issue, and state PDG strategic plans should make recommendations for improvements in this area.
Aligning learning standards birth through high school	All states have learning standards that extend from the early childhood years through K-12. The state’s ESSA plan will discuss the alignment of those standards; the PDG strategic plan should consider whether there is a need for stronger alignment between the K-12 and early childhood learning standards, or for stronger implementation tools to use with the existing standards.
Developing a coherent assessment system birth through high school	ESSA plans will look at the state’s overall approach to assessment. The PDG process should look at the state’s assessments in the pre-third grade years—particularly the early childhood years and kindergarten entry assessments—to recommend any needed changes in the state’s assessment approach. The key is to ensure that the state remains focused on information that is most useful to parents, educators, and policymakers.
Leveraging the early years in the school improvement process	ESSA plans will discuss the state’s overall approach to school improvement. The PDG strategic plan can look at how school improvement planning integrates early learning and can consider whether additional strategies might improve the process and lead to better outcomes for children.

For each issue area, the ESSA plan should inform what the PDG strategic plan says—but the ESSA plan should instigate conversation rather than close it off. Indeed, states recognize that the content of their ESSA plans needs to evolve over time and thoughtfully manage that evolution. The PDG strategic planning process is an excellent opportunity to contribute to that evolution; stakeholders from the ESSA plan should be involved in the PDG strategic plan, and when the strategic planning process is complete, its results should inform updates to the ESSA plan.

IV. CONCLUSION

State policy development in all of these areas will be dynamic over the coming years. State ESSA plans and PDG strategic plans represent important markers, but the real opportunity here is not just getting words into the plans, but creating or reinforcing a culture in which leaders from the K-12 and early childhood worlds work collaboratively on all of these issues. Ultimately the goals of ESSA and PDG are the same: to put in place the systems and infrastructure that allow states to improve the experiences of children. In addressing the policies identified in this guide, states should focus on developing those systems and

infrastructure in a collaborative and thoughtful manner. Doing so will help them continue to address these issues long after the conclusion of the PDG grant period.

The PDG process also is part of a larger body of work many states are engaged in, focusing on expanding access to high-quality early childhood education and strengthening equity by doing so:

High-quality early education programs can improve outcomes, narrow achievement gaps, and convey long-term benefits for children in school and life. This is especially the case for children from low-income families (Minervino, 2014). However, just over one third of three- and four-year-olds from low-income families were enrolled in preschool in 2013 (Kids Count, 2015), and even fewer children participate in quality infant and toddler programs. Children at risk who do not participate in high-quality early education programs are 50 percent more likely to be placed in special education, 25 percent more likely to drop out of school, 60 percent more likely to never attend college, 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime, and 40 percent more likely to become a teen parent (Save the Children, 2015).³⁹

As states assess their needs and develop strategic plans for meeting those needs, the important potential of high-quality early learning should affect policy throughout the education system.

V. RESOURCES FOR USE IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

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