

Law Adds to Pre-K's Stature as Federal-State Priority

By [Christina A. Samuels](#)

The newly updated federal K-12 statute revamps and locks into place a \$250 million grant program to support states as they develop preschool programs and directs a stream of federal grant money to state early-childhood-literacy efforts.

Those are just a couple of the ways that the Every Student Succeeds Act strengthens the ties between federal education policy and early-childhood programs carried out at the state and local levels.

Throughout the reauthorized law—the latest version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—Congress added language that makes explicit that schools can and should collaborate with preschool programs on issues such as teacher training and transitioning children into kindergarten.

Stephen Parker, the legislative director for the National Governors Association's education and workforce committee, said that kind of collaboration is something the nation's governors had been seeking. The organization's endorsement of ESSA was its first for a piece of legislation in 20 years.

"It is nice to have specific call-outs in the law," Parker said. "Under [the No Child Left Behind Act], we had a very siloed system, a one-dimensional system where you were looking solely at K-12. I think that some states were able to make that connection" between K-12 and early-childhood education, he said. But the perceived narrowness of the law sometimes made that collaboration challenging.

Laura Bornfreund, the director of early and elementary education policy for the think tank New America, said that while Title I money to help disadvantaged students already could be used for early-childhood education, that didn't happen very often. "That kind of clarity wasn't there before," Bornfreund said.

Other provisions of the law will allow charter schools to use federal dollars to add pre-K classes.

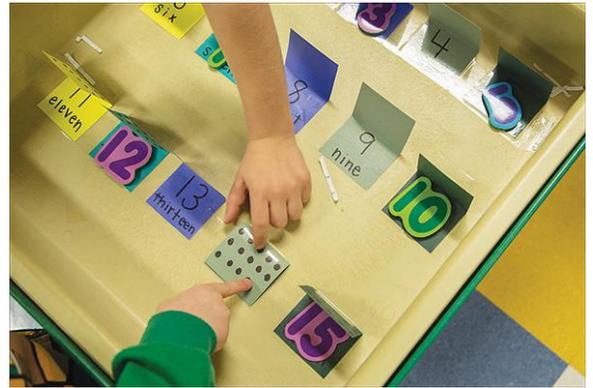
New Wrinkles

In the literacy arena, ESSA directs the Education Department to create a grant program that will help states "develop or enhance comprehensive literacy-instruction plans that ensure high-quality instruction and effective strategies in reading and writing for children from early childhood through grade 12."

Fifteen percent of that grant money is intended to support children from birth to age 5. The fiscal 2016 omnibus budget bill signed by President Barack Obama last month devotes \$190 million to that undertaking.

But the early education effort that has garnered the most attention in the reauthorized ESEA preserves the existing Preschool Development Grant program—though it will not operate in quite the same way.

At present, 18 states are splitting around \$250 million through the program, now administered by the federal Education Department. The funding is going both to states that have robust preschool programs as well as states whose programs are just getting off the ground, and is intended to improve access to high-quality pre-K for children from low-income families.



The grant program has proven quite popular among the states, many of which have created their own pre-K programs using local and state dollars.

The new program, formally written into ESSA, will be focused on program coordination, quality, and broadening access to early-childhood education. However, it will move from the Education Department to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which currently houses the Office of Head Start.

The revised program does not require some of the same quality provisions as the program that currently exists, which worries Bornfreund. For example, unlike in the current program, the new preschool development grants will not allow the federal government to mandate that programs operate for a full day or that teachers have a bachelor's degree.

Practically speaking, Bornfreund said she believes states that already have certain quality standards in place will be first in line for the funds. "The states that are not there would just be left out. Their programs would be left further behind," she said.

Parker, however, said the new program will allow more states to access that money.

"We had so many other states that did not end up qualifying that applied" for the original preschool grant program, he said. "The ability of those states to get into the game is something we're very excited about."