

# EARLY LEARNING:

## AMERICA'S MIDDLE CLASS PROMISE BEGINS EARLY

"I propose working with states to make high-quality preschool available to every child in America... Let's do what works, and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind. Let's give our kids that chance."

– President Barack Obama, February 12, 2013

The foundation of a thriving middle class is a strong education. But millions of children in this country can't reach the first rung on the ladder of opportunity because they are cut off from quality early learning. This administration is committed to closing that unjust gap through one of the boldest expansions of opportunity in a generation: high-quality preschool for every child.

### THE NEED

Studies prove that children who have rich early learning experiences are better prepared to thrive in school. Yet the United States ranks 28th in the world for the enrollment of 4-year-olds in early learning. For those who do attend, program quality varies widely, especially for children in low-income families. Less than a quarter of 4-year-olds living in poverty attend a high-quality preschool program. Doing better is more than just a moral and educational imperative; it's smart government: a public dollar spent on high-quality preschool returns \$7 through increased

productivity and savings on public assistance and criminal justice. From a growing number of voices, including from the recently concluded work of the Equity and Excellence Commission, the call has been clear to expand quality early learning in the United States.

### THE GOAL

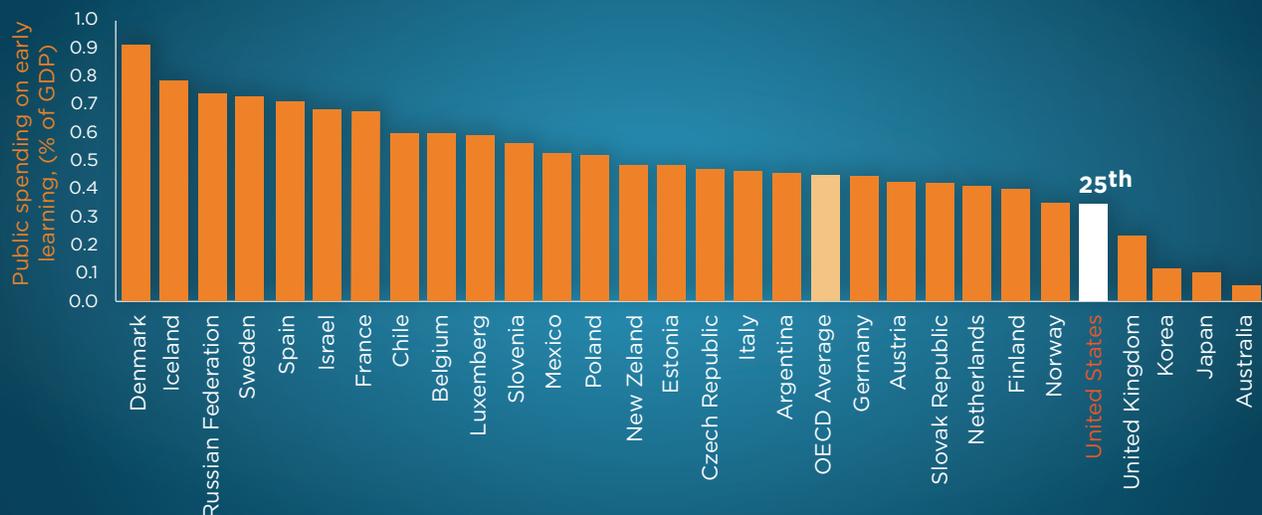
The goal is to enable every 4-year-old to attend a quality preschool program—one characterized by well-organized learning experiences, guided exploration, art, and storytelling, led by a skilled teacher. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education will work with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to significantly expand and improve services to younger children.

### THE PLAN

The administration proposes to invest \$75 billion over 10 years in a new partnership with states that would provide

## EARLY LEARNING SPENDING

The United States ranks 25<sup>th</sup> in public spending on early learning.



Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

high-quality, full-day preschool to all 4-year-olds from families whose incomes are at or below 200 percent of the poverty line. This new partnership would provide incentives for states to cover all low- to moderate-income families who want to send their children to preschool, and to serve families above the income threshold. Funds would be provided to states and distributed to local school districts, or local school districts in partnership with other early learning providers, to offer high-quality preschool programs. An additional \$750 million would provide for competitive grants to states to build capacity for implementing high-quality preschool programs. The President's preschool initiative involves cost-sharing with states, and the costs to the federal government would be fully offset through a new tax on tobacco products. States would be eligible for funding under this program if they meet criteria essential for establishing a high-quality preschool program. The federal government would assume a higher share of program costs in the initial years, with states gradually assuming more responsibility over time. States also would receive an infusion of resources to bring their existing programs up to high-quality standards, which include a full-day program, small class sizes and low child-adult ratios.

## A CLOSE PARTNERSHIP

This expansion builds on a close partnership between the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services. Recently, the two agencies worked together to unleash state-level innovation through Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge grants, which reward states that raise the bar on quality and provide connections to health, nutrition, mental health, and family support services. The Department of Education will cooperate closely with HHS to ensure that the expansion of high-quality preschool services for 4-year-olds is part of a cohesive and well-aligned system of early learning for children, beginning with prenatal care and continuing until the start of kindergarten. Over time, the Department of Education anticipates that 4-year-olds enrolled in Head Start will transition into the new program to get them ready for kindergarten, while Head Start centers

will serve a larger share of infants, toddlers, and 3-year-olds. At the same time, HHS is working to strengthen services to children from birth through age 3 through new investments and reforms in Head Start.

## STATES LEADING THE WAY

Several states have demonstrated what is possible in expanding access to early learning. In Michigan and Massachusetts, for example, Governors Rick Snyder and Deval Patrick have made expanding access to preschool programs a priority. In Alabama, Governor Robert Bentley has proposed new resources to rapidly expand early education. These leaders represent a bipartisan consensus that America can't win the race for the future by holding back children at the starting line.

## BUILDING ON SUCCESS

The federal government's quality early learning effort builds on significant work from the President's first term, including:

- **Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge:** This program has rewarded 14 states that have agreed to raise the bar on the quality of their early learning programs, establish higher standards, and provide critical links with health, nutrition, mental health, and family support.
- **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA):** IDEA programs enhance outcomes for infants, toddlers, and preschool children with disabilities and their families. The Early Intervention Programs for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities assists states in implementing statewide systems of early intervention services for all eligible infants and toddlers with disabilities from birth through age 2 and their families. The Preschool Grants for Children with Disabilities program assists states in providing a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment to all eligible children with disabilities ages 3 through 5.



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