



Capturing the Opportunity: How ESSA Can Elevate Our Youngest Learners

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Equity begins with resources. To achieve this critical goal, states and communities have various resources, but do not always understand how funding can be used to ensure equitable access to high quality early learning environments, such as Head Start, state funded pre-kindergarten, child care centers, and family child care homes, or home visiting. Many communities overlook one important source of funding for early childhood services for children from birth through the age of school entry—the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This document highlights ways in which ESSA can help fund services for low-income children, children from multilingual households, children experiencing housing insecurity, and provides additional resources to support the social and emotional well-being of children.

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INTRODUCTION

All children deserve to have experiences that meet the full range of their developmental needs and are designed to support them and their families in fully inclusive spaces. An equitable approach—where every child has access to what they need to be successful—ensures that every early learning experience, from birth to third grade and beyond, can meet children where they are and provide the supports that children, families, teachers, educators, providers, and others need to be successful.

Equity begins with resources. To achieve this critical goal, states and communities have various resources, but do not always understand how funding can be used to ensure equitable access to high quality early learning environments, such as Head Start, state funded pre-kindergarten, child care centers, and family child care homes, or home visiting.

Many communities overlook one important source of funding for early childhood services for children from birth through the age of school entry—the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which funds services for low-income children, children from multilingual households, children experiencing housing insecurity, and provides additional resources to support the social and emotional well-being of children.¹

According to the [Non-Regulatory Guidance: Early Learning in the Every Student Succeeds Act--Expanding Opportunities to Support our Youngest Learners](#) from the U.S. Department of Education, “Title I preschool programs are intended to assist children most at risk of failing to meet the State’s challenging academic standards based on multiple, educationally related, objective criteria” (U.S. Department of Education [USED], 2016, p. 9). (For additional information on eligibility, see Appendix A and [updated nonregulatory guidance](#).)

It is important to note that the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds can also be prioritized to ensure the youngest learners and their families are supported and included in all local education planning. The [U.S. Department of Education](#) notes that ESSER funds can be used for “any activity authorized by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965,” which includes services and supports for children from birth through the age of school entry. Any allowable activities under Title I are allowable uses of ESSER funds (USED, 2021, p. 10).

All children deserve to have experiences that meet the full range of their developmental needs and are designed to support them and their families in fully inclusive spaces.

¹ Pandemic relief dollars, including ESSER I, II, and III can also be used for these purposes.

As a reminder, ESSA and ESSER funds can be used to meet the needs of all young children by a local school district for:

- > Classroom-based instructional programs for young children birth to the age of school entry
- > Salaries and benefits for teachers, teacher assistants, and other staff, both in schools and in community-based programs
- > Full-day, full-year early childhood programs for young children and their families
- > Substitutes
- > Home visiting programs
- > Extended-day programs in school sites, Head Start, or community-based child care programs
- > Electronic devices
- > Nutritious snacks
- > Developmental screenings
- > Family engagement activities
- > Transportation
- > Transition programs
- > Developmentally appropriate indoor/outdoor learning materials, supplies, and equipment
- > Professional development for early childhood professionals who serve Title I eligible children
- > Social emotional supports and professional learning to address trauma
- > Comprehensive services, such as nutrition, vision, dental, and counseling

To understand how a school district might identify and address early childhood gaps in their community with ESSA funds, a district can develop an early childhood needs landscape analysis or needs assessment. The ultimate purpose of engaging in a [landscape analysis](#) is to drive school/community-level action that draws on collective will. The landscape analysis is designed to tell the story of how (and how well) the community is serving young children and their families, and to identify ways to better serve them by understanding community assets and identifying gaps in services and opportunities (Connecticut State Department of Education, & Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, n.d.). Such an analysis might include information on children and families, as well as on the early childhood system in the community.

A landscape analysis might include:

- > Students enrolled in special education, including the number of students with identified needs through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) types of disabilities, and the main areas for focus in the IEP/IFSP
- > Race and ethnicity
- > Income
- > Language spoken in the home
- > Parent needs
- > Chronic absenteeism
- > Access to transportation

- > Foster care participation
- > Homelessness/housing insecurity
- > Availability of Head Start and Early Head Start
- > Duration and intensity of early childhood participation (e.g., length of day, full-day full-year, number of days/hours of program)
- > Health status (e.g., lead exposure rates, obesity, asthma)
- > Level of subsidy available in community for early childhood to demonstrate whether and how families have supports for affordable, quality child care options
- > Availability of developmental screenings
- > Professional learning opportunities for early childhood providers
- > Access to scholarships for early childhood teachers
- > Early childhood staff vacancies

School district and community partners interested in understanding the needs of their community may be able to draw on existing sources of information; including Head Start community assessments, comprehensive needs assessments for various federal programs, census data, statewide needs assessments, and federal data sources. These include:

- [Grantee Service Profiles](#) (Head Start grantee data)
- [KidsCount Data](#) (from the Annie E. Casey Foundation)
- [U.S. Census data](#)
- [National Center for Education Statistics](#)
- [National Center for Health Statistics](#) and [the National Institutes of Health](#) (health and dental needs data)

OPPORTUNITIES TO SUPPORT YOUNG CHILDREN THROUGH ESSA

Once an early childhood landscape analysis has been completed to understand the needs of children, families, teachers, and others in the community, there are several ways to use ESSA funds to address unmet needs.



Support Children's Development in School Settings

Throughout ESSA², school districts are encouraged to expand professional development opportunities to include intentional time for preschools, including early childhood providers, and elementary school teams to collaborate and participate in professional development. A

² Title II of ESSA focuses on professional learning, while Title III provides funds to support dual language learners, and includes specific funds to support professional learning opportunities and materials for teachers working with young dual language learners.

focus area should be to expand the child development knowledge of principals and other school leaders. The language throughout ESSA promotes joint professional development that includes school staff and community-based providers, and focuses on transition, "issues related to school readiness," and other content designed to meet the needs of students through age eight. At the school district level, these provisions could elevate the quality of professional development available to early learning providers and improve alignment and expectations between community-based early learning providers, and preschool and kindergarten teachers in schools.

The goal is for all young children to experience a child-centered, play-based, high-quality learning environment that is focused on supporting their developmental needs with the resources, space, time, and support they need. Decades of research tell us that play is an essential part of children's healthy growth and development. [Early childhood experts](#) have long agreed that young children who are provided with rich play-based learning environments excel in all domains of development and learning. Play helps children increase their memory, critical thinking skills, self-regulation, social skills, oral language skills, literacy skills, mathematical and problem-solving skills, and lays the foundation for all academic learning (Garrett, C., Ritchie, S., Phillips, E.C. (2021).

ACTION STEPS >>>

- > Provide professional development for principals on the developmental stages of children from birth through third grade and best practices in early childhood education.
- > Create professional development related to social and emotional development of young children and trauma-informed practices that are specific to young children.
- > Fund professional development on state early learning standards or guidelines to emphasize the importance of providing support for all domains of development, and the importance of integrating learning within and across domains and subject areas.
- > Invest in capacity building and professional development on remote learning services, while emphasizing developmentally appropriate practices from preschool to third grade.
- > Identify and promote existing professional learning opportunities and leverage substitutes, CEUs, and cohort training models.
- > Create joint professional learning opportunities for providers/educators serving children from birth to age five and K-3 teachers that focus on the full range of child development and promote teaching and learning practices appropriate for all children.
- > Adopt coaching and mentoring practices, as well as peer-to-peer modeling, for early childhood and early elementary classrooms.
- > Ensure that school schedules include adequate time for play, recess, and rest for children in early grades.

- > Promote and support strategies and teacher-child interactions that motivate students through relationships.
- > Provide support staff, such as social workers and counselors, to respond to the needs of children and families and enhance comprehensive services.
- > Invest in additional teacher assistants so that staff/child ratios are lowered, and small group activities are possible (at a minimum, preschool and kindergarten classes should have a full-time teacher assistant).
- > Create professional learning opportunities to support family engagement (virtual/online options, as appropriate) and enhance transition activities between preschool and kindergarten, and kindergarten to first grade.
- > Support looping, when possible, to allow children to remain with the same teacher/class for multiple years, particularly for children who have had no previous or limited preschool or kindergarten experience.
- > Provide professional development on developmentally appropriate practice and trauma-informed approaches for preschool - third grade teachers, administrators, and other staff.
- > Group children with familiar peers to support social and emotional development.
- > Provide supports to ensure the physical and emotional safety of staff.



Meet the Needs of Special Populations

Families may have difficulty participating in early childhood programs, whether because of cost, scheduling, transportation, special needs, trauma, work schedules, or other concerns. School districts have a number of opportunities to address these gaps and work to create equitable access to high quality environments for all children.

ACTION STEPS >>>

- > Plan transition activities, including tours, meetings with teachers, and/or socially distanced home visits (virtual/online options, as appropriate).
- > Develop training and resources (in multiple languages) for families to understand how to access services and use online resources.
- > Provide professional development and resources (in multiple languages) for school staff to build systems of positive reinforcement to support a culture of safety and security.
- > Create full year learning opportunities and, at a minimum, summer learning opportunities, coordinated between the LEA, state-funded pre-k, Head Start, and private child care, particularly for those children with no previous or limited school experience.

- > Provide additional staffing to support homeless liaisons in the identification, enrollment, and support of children and families experiencing homelessness.
- > Create training for LEA personnel and community providers to identify and serve children who are homeless, including working with the local Child Find staff to identify children who are both homeless and in need of early intervention services.
- > Fund community outreach to identify preschool children who are, or are at risk of becoming, homeless.
- > Create partnerships and agreements with community providers serving cohorts of English learners to develop joint professional development, share materials and resources, and design specific transition activities for families of young English learners.
- > Provide developmental screenings to determine eligibility for services and identify developmental concerns.
- > Develop and disseminate resources (in multiple languages) and professional development to help families navigate IEP planning and transition for children with special needs (virtual/online options, as appropriate).
- > Fund additional staffing and stipends for teachers and other support staff to provide outreach, support, and regular opportunities to stay connected with families, particularly families experiencing homelessness.
- > Provide transportation that meets the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration Guidelines for Preschool Children Riding School Buses](#) to increase access to services.
- > Create and implement culturally appropriate home visiting (either in person or virtually).



Improve Transitions between Early Childhood Programs and Early Grades

One of the most important transitions for young children is the moment they move into their new school to participate in preschool, kindergarten, or first grade. These entry points can determine whether young children have positive feelings about school, whether families feel welcomed, and how schools are addressing the full range of children’s needs from their very first moments in school. [Research](#) from Child Trends shows that transition activities are often overlooked, despite their importance for children and families (Thomson, et al., 2022). [Intentional planning, resources, and other supports](#) for children, families, teachers, and school leaders are critical to positive experiences for young children (Bornfreund, et al., 2022).

ACTION STEPS >>>

- > Assess current transitions policies and practices.
- > Identify staff responsible for transitions into school settings and within school (kindergarten to first grade, for example).
- > Create a year-long plan for transition activities.
- > Work with early learning partners to create a community transition plan.

- > Survey parents and teachers about transition activities and revise as needed.
- > Create professional learning opportunities to support positive transitions.
- > Provide summer learning comprehensive, developmentally appropriate programming, particularly for preschool and kindergarten children with no previous or limited school experience.
- > Invest in full-year, full-day services.
- > Provide additional staffing and stipends for teachers, teacher assistants, and other support staff to provide outreach, support, and regular opportunities to stay connected with families.
- > Coordinate across the LEA, state-funded pre-k, Head Start, and private child care for aligned summer learning programming, professional development, and transitions.
- > Provide alternatives for summer learning to support families teaching their children in home settings, such as summer learning kits with appropriate materials and/or home visiting programs, such as [Parents as Teachers](#).
- > Expand Child Find activities.



Expand Access to Mental Health Supports

As children, families, and communities have moved into the period following the Covid 19 pandemic, research shows that many young children are experiencing delays and the effects of trauma, especially apparent in families of color (Costa et al., 2022; North, A., 2022). Young children, who may have had limited interaction with formal programs or any exposure to routines and caregivers outside of their families may need additional supports in order to thrive in school.

ACTION STEPS >>>

- > Provide additional teacher assistants so that staff/child ratios are lowered, and small group activities are possible (preschool and kindergarten classes should have a full-time teacher assistant, at a minimum).
- > Provide developmental screening for all children to determine eligibility for services and identify developmental concerns.
- > Restructure schedules to allow for more intentional social-emotional support, additional counselor capacity, etc.
- > Provide professional development related to social and emotional development and trauma-informed practices that are specific to young children.
- > Provide professional development for teachers and administrators/directors so that they know and understand the importance of providing children with regular opportunities to develop and practice self-regulation.

- > Offer looping, when possible, to allow children to remain with the same teacher/class for multiple years.
- > Create and use special spaces in schools that are calming for young children and include time with a counselor, psychologist, or other trained therapist.
- > Provide professional development, instructional supplies, and curricula that are trauma-informed.



Support School Leaders to Implement High Quality Early Learning Environments

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) has developed a [curriculum](#) to help school leaders understand and implement high quality early childhood programs, recognizing that many school and district leaders, including principals, assistant principals, coaches, office and support staff, and [superintendents often lack direct knowledge](#) of professional learning opportunities in child development and how to create and support high quality early learning environments for children across the early grades. It is critical to ensure that everyone in [school leadership understands](#) that early childhood and early grade classrooms may look and sound different from classrooms with older children and may need different classroom schedules to accommodate the need for play and rest (Lieberman & Bornfreund, 2019; Stipek et al., 2022).

ACTION STEPS >>>

- > Provide professional development on the full range of child development appropriate environments for young children and supports for social and emotional development of young children.
- > Provide professional development on state early learning standards or guidelines to emphasize the importance of providing support for all domains of development, and the importance of integrating learning within and across domains and subject areas.
- > Establish budgets that support the resources needed to create appropriate early learning environments and the staffing models needed to ensure young children's needs are met.
- > Develop coaching and peer mentoring for principals and other school leaders to share information and resources on building high quality early learning environments.
- > Create a district-wide Early Childhood Education leadership track for principals, community-based programs leaders, superintendents, and support staff to provide consistent information and supports on effective and high-quality early learning programs, with opportunities to develop transition plans and build relationships across settings.
- > Provide supports to ensure the physical and emotional safety of staff.

- > Develop clear and appropriate metrics for evaluating the quality of early learning environments and instructional approaches.



Improve Coordination Across Early Childhood Providers and Elementary Schools

ESSA requires significant coordination between school districts and early childhood providers in their community. The updated ED Non-Regulatory Guidance, Early Learning in the Every Student Succeeds Act: Expanding Opportunities to Support our Youngest Learners, notes that school districts must develop agreements and carry out coordination activities with Head Start agencies and other early childhood programs, whenever feasible. They must also describe how they will support, coordinate, and integrate Title I services with early childhood education programs at the LEA or school level, including plans for the transition of children to elementary school.³

ACTION STEPS >>>

- > Create opportunities for collaboration between LEA early learning programs and partners such as Head Start, state funded pre-k, private child care, mental health, housing, public health, home visiting, and others as applicable to review data and develop strategic plans.
- > Provide joint professional development across all early childhood providers in the community.
- > Align curriculum and standards.
- > Fund family engagement liaisons and coordinate and plan family engagement activities in and with community providers.
- > Develop plans for community wide nutrition services and meal access such as ensuring food availability through [No Kid Hungry](#).
- > Coordinate with shelters and housing providers to support preschool children and their families experiencing homelessness.
- > Share data on demographics, early childhood experiences, formative and summative assessments, and other information across providers.
- > Create a universal/common preschool application to determine eligibility and enrollment.
- > Coordinate availability, content, staffing, and transportation for before- and after-school services.

³ For guidance on high quality agreements between school districts and Head Start agencies, see: <https://buildthefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/NC-LEA-Head-Start-Coordination-Guidancen10.19.pdf>



Utilize Opportunities from Multiple Funding Sources

As stated earlier, there are multiple funding sources that can and should be used to ensure equitable access to high quality early learning environments. These sources are available in various state agencies/organizations/LEAs, thus, the importance of building relationships with early learning community partners is critical.

The following resources can be used to build access to high quality early learning experiences:

- All sections of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, including Title I, Title II, Title III, and Title IV)
- Remaining Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds (ESSER)
- Maternal and Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV)
- Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)
- Head Start
- Higher Education Act
- McKinney-Vento
- 21st Century Learning Centers
- State-funded pre-kindergarten

Local communities benefit when they understand whether and how these resources can be used to support the preschool to third grade continuum. Communities gain when they come together to examine data and develop strategies to best use available funding and to obtain additional funding.

ACTION STEPS >>>

- > Connect and build relationships with early learning community partners.
- > Utilize data to inform decision making.
- > Provide professional development on various funding sources (i.e., federal, state, and local), along with allowable uses of funding.
- > Develop a strategic plan to ensure all children have, or will have, access to needed services.

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Related publications by authors: [How Pandemic Relief for K-12 Education Can Support Early Childhood](#).

Read the white paper, [Children Come First: Ensuring School Policies, Practices, and Strategies Lead to Positive 3rd Grade Outcomes](#), and accompanying briefs in the Early Childhood section of [RC6 Resources](#).

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APPENDIX A

Frequently Asked Questions: ESSA and Early Childhood⁴

What is a Title I Preschool Program?

Title I is not a specific program and does not have to fund “slots” or create new programs. Title I is a funding stream that may support a broad range of early education programs and services, in addition to traditional K-12 programs. Specifically, ESSA says that a district or school that operates a preschool program under this section “may use funds available under this part to establish or enhance preschool programs for children who are under 6 years of age.” In other words, Title I preschool funds early education programs for young children from birth. Title I funds have been permitted to be used for young children below compulsory school age since the creation of the ESEA. Title I preschool is not limited to federal or state-funded pre-kindergarten initiatives.

Often, Title I funds are layered with other funding sources, including child care subsidies, Head Start, Even Start, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), state pre-kindergarten funding, and other ESSA funds (including Title II and III funds) to support particular components of an early childhood program, to expand the hours of a program, or to increase the number of children served. The Title I dollars may also be used for professional development, developmental screening, and collaboration activities between schools and community-based child care providers.

Can these funds only be used for preschool aged children?

Besides serving school-age children, Title I funds can be used in programs serving children from birth to the age at which the school district provides a free elementary education, usually around 5 years old. Districts are not required to report the specific ages of children served, only that Title I preschool services were provided to children younger than the age of school entry.

What kinds of early childhood services can be provided with ESSA funds?

Under ESSA, preschool means a range of programmatic and support services for children from birth through the official age of school entry in a district or state. These include:

- Classroom-based instructional programs.
- Salaries and benefits for teachers and other staff.
- Home visiting programs.
- Extended day programs in Head Start or community-based child care programs.

⁴ Adapted from the USED *Non-Regulatory Guidance: Early Learning in the Every Student Succeeds Act: Expanding Opportunities to Support our Youngest Learners*. (<https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essaelguidance10202016.pdf>)

- Professional development for early childhood professionals who serve Title I eligible children, including providers in non-school settings.
- Support services, such as nutrition, vision, dental, and counseling services.
- Screening and diagnostic assessment.
- Summer enrichment programs for young children and their families.
- Family literacy programs.
- Transition programs.
- Parental involvement initiatives.

Does Title I support comprehensive services?

Title I funds may support the provision of health, nutrition, and other social services if need is shown based on a comprehensive needs assessment and funds are not available from other sources.

Which children are eligible for Title I funded early childhood services?

Eligibility, in part, is based on whether a program is provided at the district level or school level and whether a program is a schoolwide or districtwide program (open to all children in a given geographic area) or a targeted assistance program. Title I is designed to meet the needs of children who are at-risk of academic failure. School districts and individual schools may decide what measures to use to determine at-risk status for young children. Income may be used to determine and prioritize eligibility but cannot be the sole factor for determining eligibility. Children who have participated in Head Start or a Title I preschool program at any time over the past two years; homeless children; and children in institutions for neglected or delinquent children are also eligible for Title I-funded preschool services.

Who decides to use ESSA funds for early childhood services?

LEAs have the option to use Title I funds to provide early education programs for all children in the district or part of a district. They may also decide not to use Title I funds for children younger than kindergarten or mandatory age of school entry. Decision-making authority for Title I funds may be different in each district and may include the district Title I director, the superintendent, the school board, or other individuals. Eligibility for a districtwide program is based on residence and assessment of risk for not meeting state academic standards (as determined by multiple, education-related, objective criteria determined by the state). LEAs may choose to use some or all of their Title I funds for districtwide early childhood programs, and then allocate any remainder to individual schools according to the federal Title I allocation requirements.

A Title I school may use all or a portion of its Title I funds to operate a preschool program for eligible children.

Schoolwide Program: If a school operates a preschool program in a schoolwide program school, all preschool children who reside in the school's attendance area are eligible to be served. A Title I school may operate a schoolwide program if a minimum of 40 percent of the students enrolled in the school or residing in the attendance area served by the school, are from low-income families. A Title I school with less than 40 percent poverty may request a waiver from the SEA to operate a schoolwide program. Guidance on schoolwide programs can be found in Supporting School Reform by Leveraging Federal Funds in a Schoolwide Program.

Targeted Assistance Program: A school may serve preschool children who reside in its attendance area and whom the school identifies as at risk of failing to meet the State's academic achievement standards when they reach school age.

An LEA may reserve a portion of funds from its Title I allocation to operate a preschool program for eligible children in the LEA as a whole or in a portion of the LEA.

District as a Whole: An LEA may serve preschool children who reside throughout the LEA and whom the LEA identifies as eligible because they are at risk of failing to meet the State's academic achievement standards when they reach school age.

Portion of the District: An LEA may serve preschool children who reside in specific Title I school attendance areas (e.g. its highest-poverty school attendance areas) served by some or all of its Title schools if, for example, an LEA does not have sufficient funds to operate a preschool program for the district as a whole.

An LEA or school may use Title I funds to improve the quality or extend the day or number of days of State preschool, Head Start, child care, or other community-based early learning programs for eligible children. Title I funds may be used to provide preschool services for Title I eligible children who:

- are not eligible for Head Start services based on income requirements;
- are eligible for Head Start but not served in a Head Start center due to unmet need;
- are enrolled in a State preschool, Head Start, child care, or community-based early learning program and
- are in need of additional services (e.g., extending the day, increasing number of days, etc.); or
- would benefit from home visiting because they are most at risk of failing to meet the State's challenging academic standards.

What standards do Title I funded early childhood programs have to meet?

The program must meet, at a minimum, the education performance standards of the Head Start Program Performance Standards that are aligned with the Head Start Child Early Learning Outcomes Framework Ages Birth to Five (n.d.).