Supporting High Quality Early Childhood Experiences for Children with and Without Disabilities and Their Families in Nevada

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It has become common for young children to be enrolled in some form early care or education programs before entering kindergarten (Whitebrook, McLean, & Austin, 2016). These experiences can encompass a range of programs and many families use multiple programs to meet their needs (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). According to the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education (DHHS/DOE; 2014) early care and education includes programs that:

- provide early care and education to children birth through age five, where the majority of children in the program are typically developing. These include, but are not limited to, private or publicly funded center or family-based child care, home visiting, Early Head Start, Head Start, private preschool, and public school and community-based pre-kindergarten programs, including those in charter schools. (p.1)

Quality early childhood programs help to promote children’s learning and development across all domains of development and prepare them for kindergarten. For children with disabilities, being meaningfully included in early care and education programs can support positive gains in development and learning. Furthermore, these early childhood programs have become vital for parents of young children to seek out employment, further education, and respite from the demands of parenting (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). However, families of young children with and without disabilities continue to struggle with access to affordable programs that meet the complex needs of families and support high quality and evidence-based early childhood education. As with the rest of the country, Nevada has been working to further the quantity and quality of early care and education experiences for its youngest residents and their families. However, as early childhood programs cross multiple sectors, departments, funding streams, and state and federal policies as well as challenges to serving children in urban, rural, and tribal areas of the state, moving ideas into action has been difficult.

Key Nevada Facts and Statistics
- It is estimated that approximately 136,000 children under the age of 6 in Nevada are in need of early education and care programs (Child Care Aware, 2017). However, across the state it is estimated that we only have the capacity for 60,000 children. In particular, there is limited public preschool programs therefore the burden of quality early education and care experiences fall to a variety of child care programs and access to quality program in low-resource areas. Nevada ranks 48th in enrollment of 3-4 year old in pre-K programs.
- Currently in Nevada, approximately 3 percent of the infant/toddler population receive Part C Early Intervention Services through IDEA. This is similar to the population across the US (i.e., range 1.8-9 percent). Since 2008, there has been a 70 percent increase in these very young children receiving services. For preschool children 3-5 years old, approximately 8 percent receive services through Part B. This is a 47 percent increase since 2008.

Recent Actions in Nevada
- The Office of Early Learning and Development was created in 2014 to administer state and federal funds for multiple early childhood programs across the state including:
  - Nevada State Pre-K
  - Pre-K Development Grant
  - Head Start State Collaboration Grant
  - Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Grant
- Continued development and implementation of Silver State Stars Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) to support programs in increasing or maintaining high quality programs.
- Increased subsidy programs for low incomes families.
- Support for Early Childhood Advisory Council to develop a strategic plan to address the needs of young children, their families, and professionals.
- Nevada has engaged in technical assistance with the Early Childhood Personnel Center (starting 2016) and National Center on Pyramid Model Innovations (starting January 2019).
Considerations for Future Actions

- Increase family access and affordability of quality early childhood programs.
- Increase professional competence to support quality early childhood programs.
- Increase program quality state-wide.

Statewide Benefits of Future Action

- Provide quality early childhood experiences for more Nevada children that will support positive short-term and long-term academic outcomes and reduce the need for and duration of remedial or special education.
- Provide increased employment opportunities for those interested in early childhood education.
- Provide families with increased choices and access to meet their families' preferences and needs related to early care and education. This may allow parents to seek more regular or increased employment or continue education that may positively contribute to the local and state economy.

Implications of Maintaining Status Quo

- Continued disproportionality of children of color, children living in poverty, and children with disabilities to begin school lacking appropriate readiness to succeed and impact long-term academic outcomes.
- Increase need and costs for specialized services and special education for children.
- Impact parents’ and families’ ability to maintain employment or seek out continuing education in order to contribute to local and state economy.

Introduction

It has become common for young children to be enrolled in some form early care or education program before entering kindergarten (Whitebrook, McLean, & Austin, 2016). In order to meet their needs, many families use multiple programs at the same time or change programs throughout the children's first five years of life (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). The number of children in child care has quadrupled since 1990 with infants and toddlers being the fastest-growing group seeking care (Kagan & Neuman, 2000). According to the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education (DHHS/DOE; 2015) early care and education includes programs that provide early care and education to children birth through age five, where the majority of children in the program are typically developing. These include, but are not limited to, private or publicly funded center or family-based child care, home visiting, Early Head Start, Head Start, private preschool, and public school and community-based pre-kindergarten programs, including those in charter schools. (p.1)

Quality early childhood programs help to promote children’s learning and growth across all domains of development and prepare them for kindergarten (Schilder, Kholoptseva, Oh, & Shonkoff, 2015; Vivanti et al., 2014; Wall, Kisker, Peterson, Carta, & Jeon, 2006). Furthermore, these early childhood programs have become vital for parents of young children to seek out employment, further their education, and gain respite from the demands of parenting (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). For children with disabilities, being meaningfully included in early care and education programs can support positive gains in development and learning. Positive experiences in early education impact short-term academic outcomes as well as contribute to positive adult outcomes (e.g., college completion, employment) and reduce the likelihood of negative experiences (e.g., incarceration, substance abuse, unemployment; Reynolds, Temple, Ou, Arteago, & White, 2011).

However, families of young children with and without disabilities continue to struggle with access to affordable programs that meet the complex needs of families and support high quality and evidence-based early childhood education. Similar to other states, child care is one of the most significant costs for families in Nevada. The annual average cost of childcare in Nevada ranges from $8,000 to $13,000. For single-parent families at 100 percent of the poverty level with one child in childcare, this constitutes up to 70 percent of a family’s income (Child Care Aware, 2017, NICPR, 2018). Maintaining high quality staff with appropriate education, training, and experiences remains a challenge. Currently, professionals working in early childhood programs receive low compensation, often without benefits, reducing the pool of educated professionals in early childhood settings (Whitebrook et al., 2016). Finally, developing high quality programs that are available in all geograph-
ic areas, providing care during varied hours, and meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families is challenging (NICPR, 2018; Rivera, 2008).

Families of young children with disabilities also struggle to find care for their children from professionals that are able to meet the needs of their children, willing to coordinate among child care and special education services, and create an engaging and safe experience for their children to interact with peers (Knoche, Peterson, Edwards, & Jeon, 2006; Wall, Kisker, Peterson, Carta, & Jeon, 2006). Notably, young children, particularly children with disabilities, children of color, and boys, are being suspended and expelled from early care and education programs at alarming rates (U.S. DHHS/DOE, 2016). Children with these negative educational experiences early in life are at increased risk for academic failure later in life (U.S. DHHS/DOE, 2016). “These students often need the support that high-quality early learning programs may provide to level the playing field and address opportunities gaps between them and their peers” (U.S. DHHS/DOE, 2016, p.12)

The evolution of practices and policies related to young children in early care and education settings have been dramatic over the past 20 years. The passing of legislation in child care, education, and special education with the development of child care licensing, professional development programs, and Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS) have responded to the increasing needs of families to find high quality early care and education for all children. It is also suggested to increase program quality through providing developmentally appropriate curriculum, increased staff training, and increased family engagement to support the inclusion of young children with disabilities in early childhood programs and eliminate early childhood suspension and expulsion (DEC/NAEYC, 2009; U.S. DHHE/DOE, 2015; U.S. DHHS/DOE, 2016).

Despite attention to early childhood education in the state over the past several years, Nevada continues to rank near the bottom of the country on educational opportunities and child outcomes (NICPR, 2018). The purpose of this paper is to discuss the importance of early childhood educational experiences for young children with and without disabilities including the benefits and challenges to providing high quality early childhood experiences to all children, review of national trends, current efforts in Nevada, and provide recommendations to continue to support Nevada’s youngest citizens and their families.

**Benefits of High Quality Early Childhood Education**

Most children will enroll in some form of early childhood educational program before entering kindergarten. Therefore, in order to maximize the benefits of these experiences, providing the highest quality of programs is essential to supporting positive outcomes for children, their families, and communities at large. For young children, those who attend early childhood programs demonstrate stronger academic outcomes later in life, have strong social and emotional skills, and reduced challenging behavior and school discipline issues (Schilder et al., 2014). Additionally, children with developmental delays in quality early childhood programs are more likely to be identified early and receive special education services earlier. This reduces long-term intensity and need for special and remedial education (Biven, Garcia, Gould, Weiss, & Wilson, 2016).

Families must seek employment in order to meet their families’ needs. Employment provides income to cover housing, food, transportation, healthcare, and personal satisfaction for parents. For many families, seeking employment or education needed for preferred employment requires some form of early care and education. In addition to finding programs that meet the location, budget, and hours of the family, parents desire programs that are safe for their children and foster children’s school readiness (Mereoiu, Bland, Dobbins, & Niemeyer, 2015). Having reliable and trusted child care allows parents to focus on their employment and contribute to the local and state economy.

By providing these experiences early in life, we increase the likely success of children both in short-term school readiness and academic outcomes and also increase their ability to grow into contributing adults to the community. This benefits families as well, allowing them to contribute financially to society, reduce their likely use of public aid programs and better meet their families’ needs. These results of early childhood education help to support states in reducing the need for later special and remedial education for children, public support services for families, and provides increased employment opportunities for those wishing to work in early
childhood settings. By investing in early childhood education, the rate of return for states economically is 13 percent (NICPR, 2018).

**Barriers to High Quality Early Childhood Education**

Early childhood programs continue to develop and evolve to meet the needs of current children, families, and professionals. Many barriers continue to exist that prevent all families from accessing high quality early childhood education, including coordination among systems, inadequate funding at federal, state and local levels, and professional qualifications and training of providers (Donohue, 2017).

When looking at the definitions of early care and education programs from the U.S. DHHS/DOE, one can note that many different types of programs exist in the early childhood education context. These programs are overseen by differing state agencies, funded in different ways, have different eligibility for participation, and use different professional qualifications for staffing. For example, pre-K programs in public schools hire only fully state-licensed teachers with university degrees, as opposed to community childcare programs that may require staff to have a high school diploma or equivalent. Head Start programs are funded through grants available from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and supported by state offices, early childhood special education programs are funded through a combination of U.S. funds through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and state departments of education, and private, for-profit child cares are funded by parent tuition. These differences in foundational structure of programs makes consistent quality challenging. Statewide QRIS programs aim to level the quality field of early childhood programs regardless of these factors.

Driven by the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine’s (2018) report on *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8*, the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment and NAEYC Power the Profession Initiative have identified a struggle in recruiting high quality professionals to the field of early childhood. In order to have well-educated and experienced professionals in early childhood programs, programs need to be able to compensate professionals appropriately. However, currently the average salary for employees in child care is $9 per hour. Many professionals are unable to afford college courses or repayment on educational loans. Furthermore, those professionals in early childhood with educational licensure also struggle with financial compensation comparable to their peers teaching in older grades (Whitebrook et al., 2016). For these reasons, many professionals do not enter or leave the early childhood profession. The constant turnover of staff and professionals lacking appropriate education to support the unique needs of young children impact the quality of early childhood programs.

For families of children with disabilities, coordinated care for their children has been especially challenging. Children with disabilities are eligible to receive services through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Infants and toddlers receive services in natural environments such as family homes and child care centers. Services are usually provided by individual professionals specific to a child’s needs (e.g., speech-language pathologist, applied behavior analyst, physical therapist) in 1-hour visits. Preschool age children typically attend a half-day program in a school district setting to receive their special education services. For families in need of full-time care, this mean that children are involved in multiple programs.

Numerous barriers to including children with disabilities in early care and education settings have been reported by professionals as well. In a recent study of childcare and special education providers, most significant barriers were related to program policies in collaboration across child care and special education and professional training of both child care and special education professionals (Weglarz-Ward, Santos, & Timmer, 2018). Despite the Americans with Disability Act and recommendations leading federal agencies and organizations, children with disabilities are still denied enrollment or expelled from programs. Often this is because programs do not feel they are physically equipped to serve these children and their staff does not have adequate education and training to support their development and learning (Child Care Aware, Division for Early Childhood, Ounce, 2017; Weglarz-Ward et al., 2018).
National Trends in High Quality Early Childhood Education

As with Nevada, early childhood education has been a focus across the nation. *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*, the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, includes Preschool Development Grants that provide states with funding to promote the coordination of existing early childhood programs to improve the access and quality of programs for children in low-resource areas. This encourages collaboration between existing early childhood programs (e.g., Head Start, center-based child care, public pre-K). Additionally, ESSA provides opportunity to support Title I programs for children at-risk of academic failure, developing or expanding charter schools, considerations for children who are experiencing homelessness, supporting children who are dual language learners, and Native American children. Several pieces of federal legislation guide how states approach early childhood education including:

- **Head Start Act/Head Start Improvement Act** provides children from low-income families with comprehensive early childhood education, health and nutrition services, and parent support.
- **Child Care Development Block Grant** provides block grants to states to help provide financial assistance to low-income families for early childhood education; established resource and referral offices to support families in selecting child care programs and providing professional development for providers; supports health and safety requirements for programs.
- **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act** provides child identification, evaluation, and intervention to infants and toddlers in natural environments (under Part C) and preschoolers (under Part B Section 619) in the least restrictive environments.
- **Americans with Disabilities Act, Title II/Title III** stipulates that child care programs must not exclude children from their programs based on the presence of a disability; programs must make reasonable accommodations and physical modifications in order for the child to participate.
- **Rehabilitation Act Section 504** prevents discrimination of persons with disabilities from any program receiving federal funding.

**Position Papers and Guidance Documents**

In recent years, the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education worked together to develop policy papers and guidance documents to help summarize existing literature and make suggestions for states and programs to promote quality experiences aligned with legislation, current research, and professional recommendations. The following topics were included:

- Inclusion of Young Children with Disabilities
- Family Engagement
- Suspension/Expulsion Prevention
- Collaboration and Coordination of Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) and Part C Programs
- Dual Language Learners
- Early Childhood Career Pathways
- Monitoring
- Homelessness
- State Advisory Councils
- Data
- Technology Use

Additionally, federal agencies have established technical assistance centers to support states in providing high quality early childhood experiences for young children with and without disabilities such as the Early Childhood Personnel Center, Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, National Center on Pyramid Model Innovations and the DaSy Center.

**National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Power to the Profession**.

NAEYC has been leading a national collaboration among key early childhood stakeholders to define the early childhood profession including developing a unified framework for career pathways, professional competencies and standards, and professional compensation. By establishing a strong, national understanding of the early childhood profession can increase the access to high quality early childhood experiences for young children and their families.

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2 See https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/initiatives/profession
**Professional Standards.** Across early childhood programs, professional qualifications vary from state to state and program to program. Regardless, professional standards from leading professional organizations express clear areas of knowledge needed to best support the learning and development of young children. Additionally, professional standards closely align with national accreditation components and often guide state licensure. All standards stress the importance of developmentally appropriate experiences for children birth to 8 years old in order to enhance their learning across all domains of development (e.g., cognition, language, physical, social, emotional). In addition to instructional content, child assessment, and designing appropriate learning environments, the following areas are included across professional standards:

- Engaging and partnering with families;
- Including children with disabilities and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; and
- Collaborating with other professionals.

**Current Nevada Efforts to Support Early Childhood Education**

In the past five years, Nevada has devoted great attention to young children and their families. In the past legislative session, numerous bills passed to increase funding for early childhood education, specify childcare regulations, and continue support committees such as the Nevada Early Childhood Advisory Council, Part C Interagency Coordinating Council, and Early Childhood B-3 Council. The Nevada Early Childhood Advisory Council developed a policy statement on pre-k suspension in 2016 and adopted a strategic plan in 2018. This plan focuses on providing excellent early learning systems, ensuring strong family-professional partnerships, and supporting child and family health.

Nevada has also received technical assistance to develop a comprehensive system of professional development with the Early Childhood Personnel Center and will begin technical assistance with the National Center on Pyramid Model Innovations to support the social and emotional development Nevada’s young children.

In order to help coordinate programming for children 0-8 years old across Nevada, the Office of Early Learning and Development was created in 2014 to administer state and federal funds for multiple early childhood programs across the state including:

- Nevada State Pre-K
- Pre-K Development Grant
- Head Start State Collaboration Grant
- Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Grant
- Child Care Development Funds funding QRIS Silver State Stars, Nevada Registry, Pre-K Standards & Early Learning Guidelines, Early Childhood Substitute Network, and TEACH Early Childhood Scholarship Program

The Nevada pre-K programs through Nevada Ready continue to serve young children and promote school readiness in Nevada. The program currently enrolls approximately 2 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds across the state. Evaluations of the program indicate promising gains for participating children including long-term academic benefits (e.g., CRT reading, math; Nevada Department of Education, 2018). It is estimated that approximately 136,000 children under the age of six in Nevada are in need of early education and care programs. Across the state, it is estimated that we have the capacity for 60,000 children (Child Care Aware, 2017). Nevada enrolls approximately 3,300 children across 56 Early Head Start and Head Start Programs. This is estimated to serve 6 percent of eligible infants and toddlers and 17 percent of eligible preschoolers. Currently, 11,600 preschool children are enrolled in public school programs (e.g., Title I, Part B). Nevada serves approximately 3,200 individuals, or 3 percent of the infant/toddler population receive Part C Early Intervention Services through IDEA (Child Care Aware, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Since 2008, there has been a 70 percent increase in these very young children receiving services (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). For preschool children aged 3 to 5, approximately 5,300 or 8 percent receive...

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3NAEYC Professional standards can be found at https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/higher-ed/standards; Division for Early Childhood standards can be found at https://www.cec.sped.org/Standards/Special-Educator-Professional-Preparation-Standards/CEC-Initial-and-Advanced-Specialty-Sets

services through Part B (Child Care Aware, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). This is a 47 percent increase since 2008 (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

In Nevada, there are approximately 4,000 people in the child care workforce. The majority (63 percent) of staff in early care and education programs have no high school or a high school diploma as their highest educational attainment and only 13 percent have a bachelor’s degree or higher (Child Care Aware, 2017). The average pay for these professionals is $11 per hour, or up to $23,000 annually, with few programs offering any benefits (e.g., health insurance, paid leave; Child Care Aware, 2017, 2018). The annual turnover rate was most recently 22 percent (Child Care Aware, 2017). Data specific to early childhood professionals in IDEA Part C and Part B 619 programs is not currently available. However, employees of local school districts and Nevada Early Intervention Services are paid competitive salaries with full benefits and are required to have state licensure.

As with the rest of the country, Nevada has been working to further the quantity and quality of early care and education experiences for its youngest residents and their families. The state has implemented a comprehensive Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) (i.e., Silver State Stars) including professional development opportunities and supporting facility licensing and professional qualifications. Nevada most recently had just under 1,000 licensed early care and education programs. Of those, about one-quarter have begun or completed QRIS process. Participating programs have increased each year, with the majority of participating programs in Washoe and Clark Counties. Currently 84 have star ratings, with most programs achieving 2 out of 5 stars in the rating system (5 stars indicating excellence). Eleven programs have achieved the highest rating, again mostly in Washoe and Clark Counties. Approximately 50 programs across the state have achieved accreditation from a national entity (Child Care Aware, 2017).

Nevada does participate in the Child Care Development Block Grants (CCDBG) and provides financial subsidy to families in need via the Children’s Cabinet and Las Vegas Urban League. In 2015, 5,300 children received subsidies to enroll in early childhood programs. These subsidies serve approximately 6 percent of the families living in poverty in Nevada and are not provided at market rate, requiring either families or programs to cover remaining costs (NICPR, 2018). In 2017, 1,300 requests were made to Nevada’s Child Care Resource and Referral for information about care during non-traditional hours and 155 requests were made about caring for children with disabilities (Child Care Aware, 2018).

The Nevada Registry tracks professionals’ competencies and provides training for professionals across the state, including collaborating with NevAEYC for an annual conference. Additionally, the Nevada Early Childhood Advisory Council and Nevada Institute for Children’s Research and Policy have established a network of professionals, researchers, and family members to begin conversations on how to reflect on past policies and procedures, integrate existing efforts, and plan for the future.

Considerations for Future Actions

When reviewing work in other states, Nevada has begun similar steps to improving early childhood education. In order to maintain the momentum related to early childhood education, state support for the development of activities for families, professionals, and programs is needed, as well as research conducted to identify persistent issues in access, affordability, and quality programs for Nevada families. Specifically, we need to address the challenges to enrolling more low-incomes families in Early Head Start and Head Start programs, applying for subsidy opportunities, and recruiting and retaining quality professionals. With these increased efforts, young children can experience high quality programs that make them ready to learn and succeed in kindergarten, including reading comprehensively by third grade and developing social and emotional competence. In addition to already discussed state committees, potential collaborators to support early childhood programing include Nevada Medical Center’s Global Science of Play Initiative, NevAEYC, Nevada DEC, Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, Public Broadcasting Service and its local affiliates, and library systems. The following recommendations build on current efforts across the state:

1. Increase family access and affordabilty of quality early childhood programs.

   • Develop public awareness campaigns to raise awareness of early childhood programs, subsidy availability, and indicators of quality child care.
2. Increase professional competence to support quality early childhood programs.
   - Support professional development of early childhood professionals through on-going pre-service and in-service education. Provide funding and expertise to create integrative and flexible systems such as online and in-person degree programs.
   - Support development of blended early childhood education and early childhood special education licensure and degree programs at all levels (e.g., associate, bachelor, and masters) in order to provide appropriate, inclusive programs for children with and without disabilities. This could be done by supporting workgroups with key stakeholders and experts through dedicated staff, space, and funding for meetings.
   - Require disability-related training for all early care and education professionals.

3. Increase program quality statewide.
   - Provide increased staff and funding to support QRIS, professional development, and licensure efforts.
   - Develop methods to share statewide early childhood suspension and expulsion policy with early childhood programs and support administrators’ ability to adhere to policy.
   - Support development of statewide policy for including children with disabilities in early care and education programs.
   - Continue to support collaboration across sectors and stakeholders (e.g., state agencies, higher education, practitioners, families) by providing meeting space, travel expenses, technology, and staffing for regular meetings.
   - Include early childhood program plans for professional teaching schools to provide clinical master’s degree programs, expert mentors and professional teaching partnerships, and state of the art clinical residency programs for pre-service professionals.

References


**Additional Resources:**


**Nevada Resources:**

Children’s Cabinet: http://www.childrenscabinet.org

Nevada Early Childhood Advisory Council: http://nvecac.com/

Nevada Registry: http://www.nevadaregistry.org/

Nevada Silver State Stars (QRIS): http://www.nvsilverstatestars.org/