



# Early Childhood Agenda for Governors in 2019

By Simon Workman and Cristina Novoa December 2018

Center for American Progress



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# Introduction and summary

With 20 new governors and 16 re-elected governors starting new terms in January, 2019 has the potential to be a year of big change at the state level.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly the case in the early childhood policy arena, as many newly elected governors discussed early childhood education as part of their campaigns.<sup>2</sup> Governors are in a prime position to make progress on this issue and elevate the positive impact that access to high-quality early childhood education can have for children, working families, and businesses.

In states and cities that have made significant progress on early childhood issues in recent years, the crucial role of leadership has been a common thread. Success has often come when a governor, state legislator, or mayor makes early childhood education a key priority and uses his or her power and influence to drive progress forward. In Washington state, for example, Gov. Jay Inslee (D) has focused on early childhood education throughout his tenure, creating the state's Department of Children, Youth, and Families in 2017 and significantly increasing funding to support infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, many preschool initiatives developed in the past decade, such as Pre-K 4 SA in San Antonio and New York City's universal pre-K program and 3-K for All initiative, have been the result of mayors' sustained leadership on the issue. Former and current mayors, including Edwin Lee (D) in San Francisco, Greg Ballard (R) in Indianapolis, Julián Castro (D) in San Antonio, and Bill de Blasio (D) in New York City, have recognized the power of early childhood education to support city economies—and have put their political weight behind it.

Millions of working families need affordable early learning programs. Without reliable child care, parents may drop out of the workforce, miss workdays, or reduce their hours—all of which can have a significant impact on families' economic security and employers' productivity. A recent analysis from Indiana found that a lack of access to child care costs the state nearly \$1.1 billion in economic activity every year.<sup>4</sup> Other studies have estimated that if families in every state were able to access affordable child care, the returns from increased maternal labor force participation would amount to approximately \$70 billion annually, boosting U.S. gross domestic product by around 1.2 percent.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the rapid brain development that begins before birth and continues throughout a child's first three years underscores the need for investments in early childhood to support an effective future workforce. Today's infants and toddlers are tomorrow's doctors, teachers, engineers, and computer programmers. Families need assistance beginning in the prenatal period, which starts with providing supports for pregnant women. Ensuring that all families—regardless of income level, ZIP code, race, or disability status—have access to high-quality early childhood programs and supports during the prenatal period can help reduce achievement gaps and set children on a trajectory for future success. Children with disabilities and their families need access to supports and services, knowledge about their rights under the law, and connections to the disability community to ensure that they can set and achieve high expectations for their futures.

## States need to increase investments in early childhood

National data on the status of the current early childhood system make it clear that significant public investment is needed to realize the potential of all young children. States can use their own specific data to help make a more localized case for investing in young children.

Examples of key national data include:

- Working families in every state are struggling with the high price of child care, which can often cost more than tuition and fees at a public four-year, in-state university.<sup>6</sup>
- Even if families can afford to pay for child care, it is often unavailable—more than 50 percent of neighborhoods in the United States are deemed a child care desert, defined as an area where the demand for child care exceeds the supply.<sup>7</sup>
- Despite the financial burden families face when paying for child care, many providers are unable to generate sufficient revenue to cover child care's true cost—let alone operate a high-quality program and pay teachers a livable wage.<sup>8</sup>
- The current child care subsidy system reaches only 1 in 6 eligible children, and only one state reimburses providers at the federally recommended level.<sup>9</sup>
- Nationally, state pre-K programs serve only 33 percent of 4-year-olds and 5 percent of 3-year-olds.<sup>10</sup>
- Across the United States, less than 4 percent of families who need home visiting services receive them.<sup>11</sup>
- Across the United States, only 27 percent of parents of children under age 5 report that their child received developmental screening.<sup>12</sup>

In an increasingly polarized political environment, early childhood education stands out as a bipartisan issue. A national poll conducted by the Center for American Progress in 2018 found that more than three-quarters of parents and around two-thirds of voters with no children said that they were more likely to vote “for a candidate who supports increased funding for child care assistance and to expand access to early childhood education.”<sup>13</sup> In addition, national polling conducted over the last five years by the First Five Years Fund has consistently found support for investments in early childhood education across the political spectrum, with voters ranking quality early childhood education as one of their top priorities and supporting increased government funding to help families access care.<sup>14</sup>

In this report, CAP lays out an agenda for governors to make progress on early childhood in 2019 and beyond. Families need affordable, high-quality early childhood programs and supports for healthy child development from birth to kindergarten that reflect parents’ needs and prepare children for school. There are key steps governors can take early on to signal that early childhood education is a priority for their administrations and set their respective states on a path toward this goal. To that end, this report begins with examples of actions that governors can take in the first 100 days of their administration. The authors then discuss comprehensive solutions that governors and their states should work toward to make lasting progress to support families and young children.

More than three-quarters of parents and around two-thirds of voters with no children said that they were more likely to support a candidate for office who was in favor of investing in early childhood.

# Agenda for governors' first 100 days in office

There are several immediate ways for governors to support young children and working families. These include demonstrating their commitment to early childhood, building a governing structure that supports early childhood, and using the power of their office to promote data-driven decision-making.

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## Demonstrate a commitment to early childhood

As the most prominent elected officials in their states, governors have a platform to highlight the importance of early childhood education and the benefits it brings to children, families, and state economies. Governors can do this by including early childhood education in their State of the State addresses and their budgets, as well as by elevating public awareness of the issue.

### Discuss early childhood in the State of the State address

One of the first major speeches new or re-elected governors make is their State of the State address—their first address to joint assemblies. Discussing the importance of early childhood programs in this venue would allow a governor to provide a clear sign of his or her commitment to this issue as a central plank of a working families and economic development agenda. Governors can use the address to highlight the stories of working families who are trying to do the best for their children but struggle to get by due to the high cost of child care.<sup>15</sup> Governors can also cite data on their states' current early childhood system and birth outcomes, highlighting any current policies that are falling short.<sup>16</sup> They should use the address to appeal to citizens' shared values—that all children deserve a fair shot at success and that parents who work hard should be able to afford to provide for their families—in order to make the case for policy solutions to address families' needs.

### Include early childhood investments in governors' budget proposals

A budget is a clear statement of priorities. While states vary in terms of how much power governors have over spending decisions, all governors publish a budget that indicates which areas they believe public investments should target.<sup>17</sup> In their budget

proposals, governors should include increased funding for state child care assistance programs to enable these programs to serve all eligible children, as well as additional resources to expand state preschool programs to provide full-day preschool to all 3- and 4-year-olds. Governors should also call for an expansion of voluntary home visiting services and prenatal interventions to support pregnant women and infants, as well as dedicated resources for child screenings and early intervention services to better address young children’s developmental delays as early as possible. Including these items in the annual budget would set a clear marker of commitment to the needs of families and young children.

### Raise public awareness about the current early childhood landscape

Governors—especially those who are newly elected—have a high profile in the media and among the public. Where and how they spend their time during their first 100 days in office is a strong indication of their priorities for the term. Governors should use their public profiles to draw attention to early childhood issues. For example, they could visit an early childhood program to highlight the positive impact that a high-quality program can have on children and families. A governor’s presence would demonstrate that early childhood is a central issue that affects both the current state workforce and the workforce of the future. Such a commitment would emphasize that early childhood education cannot be dismissed as a secondary issue left for less high-profile officials to address. Governors could also lead a listening session with parents and early childhood providers to hear directly from those most affected by current policies or the lack thereof.

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### Build a governing structure that supports early childhood

Governors have the power to appoint state executive branch officials and, in some cases, the authority to create new state departments or agencies. Governors can use these powers to ensure that their administration is set up to support early childhood education and development. These efforts could include creating a combined office of early childhood education; appointing a Children’s Cabinet and encouraging interagency coordination; appointing an early learning adviser; and creating formal advisory committees to convene key stakeholders.

### Create a combined office of early childhood education

The issues affecting early childhood involve numerous departments, including health and human services, education, and labor and employment. Establishing one state agency charged with supporting children from birth to kindergarten would help streamline decision-making, eliminate inefficiencies, and ensure that all state systems are coordinated and aligned to the same goals. Although the agency would be a new entity, staff could be permanently reassigned from other departments.

### Appoint a Children’s Cabinet and encourage interagency coordination

Even if governors are not empowered to create new agencies, they can take steps to encourage interagency coordination to achieve many of the same goals. Governors can appoint a formal Children’s Cabinet, comprising heads of the different state agencies that affect early childhood issues, through an executive order. It would be tasked with coordinating services for all children in the state and ensuring consistency across different parts of the administration in line with the executive branch’s policy priorities.<sup>18</sup> Governors can also direct agency heads to enter into data-sharing agreements with each other to coordinate programs, eliminate administrative roadblocks, and ensure that programs housed in different agencies can work in tandem.

### Appoint an early learning adviser in the governor’s immediate office

Most governors have an education adviser who focuses on K-12 education. By appointing a similar adviser to focus on early childhood issues, governors can send a strong message about their commitment to this issue and ensure a voice for early childhood in the budgetary and policy decisions that happen at various levels across the state. An early learning adviser can also confirm that interagency coordination is occurring, help resolve roadblocks, and coordinate governor-appointed committees focused on early childhood.

### Create formal advisory committees to convene key stakeholders

A statewide commitment to early childhood requires support from a broad group of stakeholders. Governors can lead the way, but they should also use their office to convene key groups to focus on this issue. Governors can establish a task force comprising public and private stakeholders, including parents, advocates, child care providers, early educators, home visitors, health care professionals who work with pregnant women, and pediatric medical personnel. Such stakeholders can work with the governor to develop a strategic plan for early childhood or address specific issues, such as compensation for early childhood educators or access to services for children with disabilities and their families.

In addition, given their role as the CEO of their respective states, governors are in a unique position to engage the business community. By forming a business advisory committee—comprising key industry leaders in the state, as well as representatives of the small-business community—governors can help make the economic case for investing in early childhood education. The business community can be a powerful ally in advocating for the increased investments necessary to fund a robust early childhood system; therefore, including these voices can help create buy-in early in the process.<sup>19</sup>

It is important that the advisory committees and task forces in each state reflect the population of children and families who receive early childhood services in that area. They must represent the geographic, economic, ethnic, disability, and racial diversity of the state, which would help ensure that policy proposals and recommendations coming from these groups fully account for families' needs and are culturally and linguistically sensitive.

A statewide commitment to early childhood requires support from a broad group of stakeholders.

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### Use the power of the governor's office to promote data-driven decision-making

Collecting and analyzing data to better understand the early childhood landscape can help states identify service gaps and underserved populations or geographic areas. When governors have access to data, they can better advocate for their policy proposals and make informed decisions about where to direct limited resources.

Governors should use the power of their office to make data more accessible. This can include streamlining data-sharing agreement processes; supporting mandatory reporting requirements; and providing funding for state-specific studies on the availability, affordability, and benefits of early childhood education programs. States can use early childhood data to better understand the true cost of child care; identify child care deserts; support the early childhood workforce; and review infant and maternal mortality and severe maternal morbidity.

### Understand the true cost of child care

It is no secret that child care is unaffordable for many U.S. families.<sup>20</sup> Even so, teacher wages are low, and programs often still have to raise additional revenue beyond parent tuition and child care subsidies.<sup>21</sup> To understand what it truly costs to provide high-quality child care and preschool with adequate teacher compensation, states should conduct a cost-of-quality study.<sup>22</sup> Data from such a study can inform state planning, as well as identify the gaps between current state and local resources and the true cost of high-quality child care.<sup>23</sup> These data—specifically, data that highlight the gap between subsidy rates and the real cost of quality—can also be used to advocate for changes to payment rates in the child care subsidy system. Current subsidy rates are based on the local market price and therefore perpetuate system inequalities. In low-income neighborhoods where parents cannot afford high tuition, for example, subsidy rates based on market prices will never be sufficient to cover the cost of quality.

Governors can support cost of quality studies by directing state agencies to collect and share data with study conductors on early educator compensation, staffing levels, and program expenses. They can use the results of the study to highlight the gap between current subsidy rates and the true cost of quality, as well as to use the results of the study to work with other governors, federal policymakers, and national organizations to make the case for increased federal investments in the child care subsidy program.<sup>24</sup>

### Identify child care deserts

In addition to having trouble accessing affordable care, many families also struggle to find a child care facility that meets their needs. Nationally, more than 50 percent of children under age 5 live in a child care desert—a neighborhood or community that either has no licensed child care provider or has so few that there are more than three children for every available spot.<sup>25</sup> Child care deserts are also more common when one is looking specifically at care for infants and toddlers.<sup>26</sup> Deserts vary significantly by state; even within states, there are areas that are more likely than others to be child care deserts. States can conduct localized analyses to identify specific areas or populations—such as children with disabilities—for which geographic access to child care is limited. CAP has data on licensed child care centers and family child care homes for all 50 states, which can be made available to states looking to address child care deserts.

### Support the early childhood workforce

Most states have a workforce registry that gathers information about early childhood teachers, such as demographics, education levels, employment history and salary information.<sup>27</sup> However, this registry is underutilized in most states—teacher participation is low, and states often do not make decisions about professional development or financial incentives based on available registry data. Governors can direct state agencies to develop policies that would encourage participation in such registries, such as requiring educators who work in licensed child care programs to participate or making participation a formal component of the state's quality rating and improvement system. If states can harness the power of workforce registries, they can get a clearer picture of their early childhood workforce and pursue policy interventions that would increase compensation and support the current needs of the workforce.

### Analyze infant and maternal mortality and severe maternal morbidity

Healthy brain development occurs throughout pregnancy, accelerating rapidly in the final weeks.<sup>28</sup> Preterm birth and other birth complications can threaten healthy brain development during the prenatal period and a child's first few years of life. Policy interventions can increase the proportion of babies who are born full-term, meaning that their brains and nervous systems have had the chance to fully develop. The first step in addressing preterm birth is to understand the current rates, causes, and correlates.

Because preterm birth is closely linked to mothers' health, committees that examine maternal mortality and severe maternal morbidity—or life-threatening pregnancy complications—can shed light on the reasons behind preterm birth.

To better understand the causes of increasing maternal mortality rates, governors can set up fetal and infant mortality review committees and maternal mortality review committees to analyze what caused these deaths. For example, Oregon and Indiana recently introduced legislation to create maternal mortality review committees, and Maine has had a panel in place to review maternal and infant deaths since 2005.<sup>29</sup> In states where such committees exist, governors can also increase funding for them to help identify ways to reduce maternal and infant mortality, as well as related outcomes such as preterm birth and birth complications, which are associated with health and developmental challenges for children.<sup>30</sup> Nationally, there are persistent racial disparities in maternal and infant mortality, an issue that should also be a primary focus of these committees.<sup>31</sup>

# Long-term agenda for a comprehensive early childhood system

A robust early childhood system should be available for children from before they are born through kindergarten entry, providing supports for families and ensuring access to affordable, high-quality child care and preschool for all children. Achieving this vision requires leadership from the highest levels of the state and a long-term commitment from a broad group of stakeholders. This section details three key policy goals that underpin a long-term agenda for a comprehensive early childhood system: Make home visiting available to all families; provide high-quality child care for all families; and provide full-day, universal preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds.

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## Make home visiting available to all families

Many families need extra help during pregnancy and a child's first years.<sup>32</sup> Parents often must reorganize their entire lives—from their household expenses and their daily routines, to their communication styles—as they step into the rewarding and challenging role of raising a child. The fact that babies' brains develop rapidly also makes this early period critical. Indeed, a baby's brain gains one-third of its size in the last five weeks of pregnancy alone and continues to form approximately one million new neural connections per second until age 3.<sup>33</sup> Sensitive, responsive interactions between children and their caregivers, including parents, strengthen these connections.<sup>34</sup> For both parents and babies, a strong start to life as a family begins with making sure that parents have the support they need.

Home visiting is one such support strategy for families. Home visiting refers to a set of evidence-based programs in which skilled professionals deliver early childhood and family services, such as coaching on stress management, nutrition, and child development, for both parents and children in families' homes. Services often begin during a mother's pregnancy and continue through a child's entry into school. Decades of research show that home visiting reduces the risk of preterm birth and improves school readiness, maternal health, family economic self-sufficiency, and much more.<sup>35</sup>

However, because resources are often limited, these programs only serve a small fraction of the families who could benefit from support.<sup>36</sup>

Home visiting is designed to meet families where they are—from a young, first-time mother, to a military family facing deployment—and provide and connect them to the services they need. Home visitors also play a crucial role in identifying when a child’s development is delayed or disordered. For this reason, states should provide home visitors with robust training on developmental screenings and allow them to bill Medicaid for these services.<sup>37</sup> Expanding developmental and behavioral screening plays an important role in the early detection of developmental delays and helps connect children with the critical supports they need to learn and grow—and to which they are entitled by federal law.<sup>38</sup>

Governors should set a goal of funding universal voluntary home visiting for all families in their respective states. While the intensity of services will differ based on families’ specific needs, all families can benefit from home visiting, and governors should direct state agencies to make the program an integral part of maternal and infant health services and the overall early childhood system. To help increase access for low-income families, states should explore ways to pay for home visiting services through Medicaid.<sup>39</sup> A Center for American Progress analysis suggests that leveraging Medicaid to pay for home visiting could result in 20,000 fewer infant deaths and 400,000 fewer preterm births nationally.<sup>40</sup> Governors can use the power of their office to increase understanding of home visiting programs and raise the programs’ profile, helping state legislators understand the benefits of supporting parents from pregnancy onwards. Specifically, governors can highlight successful existing programs and significantly increase the budget for these services as a down payment on achieving universal access.

A baby’s brain gains one-third of its size in the last five weeks of pregnancy.

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## Provide high-quality, affordable child care for all families

A comprehensive early childhood system that provides access to affordable, high-quality child care for all children can have significant benefits for children, their families, and state economies. Children who engage in age-appropriate learning activities led by well-trained teachers are better prepared for kindergarten and a lifetime of learning. This in turn helps close achievement gaps, promotes equity of opportunity, and ultimately supports the future workforce.<sup>41</sup> Having access to affordable and reliable child care allows parents to build their careers while knowing that their children are in a safe and enriching environment. Adequate public investment to help families afford high-quality child care would mean that parents could put more money toward

essential needs and allow them to build up their savings to support their family's long-term economic security. At the same time, a robust child care system must ensure that teachers are properly compensated for the valuable work they do and must promote early childhood education as a viable career option.

This type of comprehensive approach is possible. At the federal level, the Child Care for Working Families Act introduced by Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) and Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA) in 2017 offers a blueprint for states to follow.<sup>42</sup>

Every state has a child care assistance program—funded by the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant and state matching funds—that helps families pay for child care. However, limited funding means that only 1 in 6 eligible families nationwide receives child care assistance—and many pay a significant family copayment. In 15 states, families with incomes above 150 percent of the federal poverty line do not qualify for assistance.<sup>43</sup> Many families above this eligibility threshold struggle to afford child care and spend a significant share of their monthly incomes on child care tuition.<sup>44</sup>

States should dramatically expand eligibility for child care assistance to allow the majority of working families to access support. To achieve this goal, states should progressively increase eligibility thresholds until they reach 150 percent of state median income, which would cover most of the children and families who need support.<sup>45</sup> States should also set limits on family contributions in order to alleviate the economic burden of paying for child care. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines child care as “affordable” when it takes up no more than 7 percent of a family's income.<sup>46</sup> States should use this figure as the cap for family contributions and institute a sliding fee scale based on family income. For example, families in the lowest income bracket would pay nothing, while other families' contributions would increase as a percentage of income until the 7 percent cap is reached.

In this expanded child care assistance system, it is important to base child care payment rates on the true cost of quality. The system should also include increased compensation for early childhood teachers that reflects the importance of their work and enables them to build long-term careers as early childhood professionals. More than 75 percent of child care teachers currently earn less than a living wage.<sup>47</sup> Increasing pay for this predominantly female workforce<sup>48</sup> will support both the quality of early childhood programs and the families of early childhood teachers. States must also invest in professional development systems and supports for early childhood educators. These teachers are often the most important caregivers after parents, and it is essential they have access to high-quality teacher preparation programs and continuous learning opportunities.

States should dramatically expand eligibility for child care assistance so that the majority of working families can access support.

These include trainings on academic and socio-emotional development, as well as resources to conduct screenings that would allow them to identify developmental and behavioral challenges early, when interventions can have the most impact.

Such dramatic changes to states' child care assistance systems will require significant increases in state investments. Governors have a key role to play in laying out the vision for this system and charging all stakeholders with working together to achieve these goals. They can make incremental changes, such as progressively increasing eligibility limits and provider payment rates, and track these steps to demonstrate progress toward the larger goal. It is also important to highlight the benefits of an expanded system. Analyses of the potential effects of an expanded child care assistance system with capped family payments, expanded eligibility, and increased teacher pay have found significant benefits. For example, an estimated 700,000 new jobs would be created nationally in the early childhood sector as the market responds to the increased demand for high-quality child care slots, and the current early child care workforce would see an average 26 percent increase in earnings. Forty million children would become eligible for assistance—up from the 12 million children who are currently eligible—and the average family of four would spend no more than \$45 per week on child care, freeing up income for necessities.<sup>49</sup>

#### Provide full-day universal preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds

The research is clear: Access to a high-quality preschool program has positive short- and long-term benefits for young children.<sup>50</sup> However, in 2016, only about 66 percent of 4-year-olds and 42 percent of 3-year-olds were enrolled in preschool across the United States.<sup>51</sup> In addition, children in low-income families are less likely than their peers from higher-income families to attend preschool.<sup>52</sup> Across the United States, there are significant variations in access to state-funded preschool, with only 10 states serving more than 50 percent of 4-year-olds as of 2017.<sup>53</sup> A handful of states have near-universal state preschool programs—serving more than 60 percent of 4-year-olds—but many only offer part-day programs or are funded at levels that limit their impact. For example, both Vermont and Florida have near-universal preschool, enrolling 75 percent and 77 percent of all 4-year-olds, respectively. However, neither state offers a full-day preschool program, and state funding amounts to less than \$6,900 annually per child in Vermont and \$2,300 per child annually in Florida.<sup>54</sup> In comparison, CAP research estimates that the true cost of providing preschool that meets state licensing standards is \$10,200 per year in Vermont and \$7,400 per year in Florida.<sup>55</sup>

To make real progress on universal preschool and to ensure that all children—regardless of income level—enter kindergarten ready for school, states must expand public funding for preschool. A robust universal preschool program will offer a full-day program; provide sufficient funding to cover the true cost of high-quality preschool; and be available in multiple settings, including community-based centers and family child care homes, in order to meet the needs of children and families.

## Key components of universal preschool

Making high-quality preschool universally available is a laudable policy goal. A number of steps must be taken to ensure that all universal preschool programs meet the needs of families and children and achieve their full potential. These steps include:

### 1. **Allocate sufficient funding to achieve desired outcomes.**

States must provide adequate funding to cover the true cost of a high-quality preschool program, including an evidence-based curriculum, developmentally appropriate class sizes and teacher-child ratios, and compensation at sufficient levels to recruit and retain highly skilled and experienced teachers.<sup>56</sup> In addition, funding must consider the cost of developing a universal system—which often entails a significant increase in capacity and staffing—and the need for robust teacher education and continuing education programs.

2. **Provide two years of high-quality preschool.** Providing public funding for two years of preschool beginning at age 3 promotes equitable access to high-quality programs, ensuring that all families can realize the benefits of early childhood education for at least two years prior to kindergarten entry. While it may be necessary to prioritize certain populations, such as children in low-income families, in the short term, states should ultimately strive for a universal

program. This would not only promote equitable access, but also encourage diverse classrooms and ensure that preschool is viewed as a program that benefits the entire state.

### 3. **Allow state-funded preschool to be delivered in multiple settings.**

The economics of child care businesses are such that without preschoolers, child care programs struggle to be financially viable.<sup>57</sup> The gap between expenses and revenues is much larger for infant and toddler care than it is for care of preschool-age children.<sup>58</sup> Providers serving a mix of age groups can allocate costs in a way that ensures financial stability. If publicly funded preschool is available only in public school-based programs, however, private providers will lose their preschool-age children and may have to close their doors, further hurting the already limited infant and toddler child care market.<sup>59</sup> States can avoid this outcome by mandating that their universal preschool initiatives fund multiple types of programs, including community-based child care centers and family child care homes.<sup>60</sup> In this way, not only can universal preschool avoid having negative effects on existing infant and toddler care, but it can also have a positive spillover effect: If providers have a stable and sufficient funding stream supporting their 3- and 4-year-olds, they can dedicate additional resources or third-party funding directly to supporting infants and toddlers.

Governors must take the lead on promoting the benefits of universal preschool as a key part of their state's education system. A well-funded universal preschool program can help ensure equitable access to the type of high-quality preschool programs that have been shown to close the achievement gap and better prepare children for kindergarten and beyond.<sup>61</sup> In addition, the benefits of preschool extend to parents and families. A full-day program allows parents to work—or to work longer hours—and ensures that publicly funded preschool is a viable option for families whose schedules do not allow them to utilize a part-day program.<sup>62</sup> Recent research from the universal preschool program in Washington, D.C., found a 10 percentage-point increase in maternal labor force participation attributable to the district's preschool program, providing further evidence of the broader economic impact of full-day preschool.<sup>63</sup> Beyond this benefit, estimates of high-quality preschool's return on investment find that for every \$1 invested, states can see returns of between \$4 and \$13 derived from savings such as a reduced need for special education services and increased future tax revenue.<sup>64</sup> As state leaders, governors should emphasize the economic impact of increased preschool access on the state.

Moving to universal access is a big step, particularly for states that have low preschool enrollment. Governors can aid this process by convening a universal preschool implementation work group made up of key stakeholders including parents, providers, school system administrators, community leaders, advocates, and elected officials.<sup>65</sup> This group can be tasked with developing an implementation plan and working through the decisions that need to be made to implement a universal model, including decisions around governance and funding structures, quality requirements, eligibility, and implementation timelines. Putting the weight of the governor's office behind such a work group would signal the urgency of this initiative and encourage the participation of key stakeholders, ultimately increasing the likelihood of successfully instituting a universal program.

# Conclusion

For millions of Americans, 2019 brings hope that policymakers will act on early childhood education issues to alleviate families' financial burden and provide children with access to high-quality care and education. More than 80 percent of the U.S. population lives in states that will have a newly elected or re-elected governor beginning in January, and many of these governors included early childhood education in their winning platforms.<sup>66</sup> Early childhood education is central to supporting working families' economic security and the current and future workforce, and it can significantly contribute to state economies.

As shown in this report, there are several steps that governors can take in the first 100 days of their administration to support early childhood programs. They can demonstrate their commitment to young children and working families by highlighting early childhood in their State of the State addresses and including funding requests in their budgets. They can also organize their administration to center children's issues and can make immediate changes in how data are collected and disseminated in order to highlight gaps in their states' current systems. As the CEOs of their states, governors must use their platform to lead on this issue and make the economic case for a long-term, comprehensive solution that includes expanded home visiting services; guaranteed affordable, high-quality child care for all families; and universal preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds.

The short- and long-term impacts of early childhood investments are clear. Not only do these investments help ensure that young children served by these programs and services start school ready to learn, but they also support parents by ensuring that they can work, provide for their families, and contribute to the overall economy. Voters recognize that early childhood education is an issue worthy of government support, and research has proven that these investments work. It is time for political leaders to take up this issue and deliver for their states' youngest residents.

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## About the authors

**Simon Workman** is the associate director of Early Childhood Policy at the Center for American Progress.

**Cristina Novoa** is a policy analyst for Early Childhood Policy at the Center.

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