



Mark K. Shriver
President

May 25, 2016

The Honorable John B. King, Jr.
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary King,

On behalf of Save the Children Action Network (SCAN), we appreciate the opportunity to provide recommendations in response to the Department of Education's request for non-regulatory guidance to assist States, districts and other grantees in understanding and implementing the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Established two years ago to expand Save the Children's capacity to transform young lives, SCAN is committed to ensuring bold action on behalf of the youngest, and too often forgotten, global citizens – our children. For this reason, we have a strong commitment to early childhood education – by ensuring access to high-quality early education for every U.S. child.

SCAN was pleased to see that the ESSA explicitly names early learning as an acceptable use of funds for states, districts and other grantees to deepen their investment. Ensuring access to high-quality care for children is the best strategy to improve education, health and economic outcomes for children from birth.

It is our hope that the Department of Education will provide non-regulatory guidance for states and districts for the following provisions of the law that can support the work they are doing to provide access to high-quality early learning and development opportunities:

High-Quality Continuum of Care

SCAN commends the continued authority maintained at the local level to leverage federal funding to provide services for children from birth through the age of school entry. SCAN believes there must be strong coordination from Pre-K through 3rd grade in order to ensure students build upon previous knowledge and continue to grow throughout their early education years. Expansion of this continuum downward to infant and toddler programming and care would allow for a stronger foundation to be built even earlier in life.

One area of expansion is in the Preschool Development Grant program. Now housed at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), it is critical that there be coordinated efforts between the Department of Education, HHS, and state and local education agencies, to ensure that this program continue to provide expanded access and opportunity while retaining high-quality and standards that children deserve.

Along the same lines, there needs to be additional supports in place for afterschool care and place-based initiatives such as Promise Neighborhoods. These types of programs offer additional supports for students and families. Although they are beyond the typical classroom setting, these programs offer opportunities for growth and learning and therefore should receive similar types of support through professional development and engagement practices.

Non-regulatory guidance should provide states and local education agencies with best practices for creating this type of continuum throughout the education system.

Family Engagement

Family engagement is a fundamental element of any school improvement effort, including efforts to promote educational equity. This has led to the development of new and innovative approaches to integrate family engagement programs into education systems.

Continued family engagement is important through the school years. Longitudinal studies show that high family involvement is associated with improved literacy skills for children growing up in low-income households and whose parents have limited formal education.ⁱ With this in mind, federal guidance to states should include support for using funds for family engagement for practices proven to improve schools and advance student achievement.

Non-regulatory guidance should reiterate the importance of reaching diverse families, including families with children who are dual language learners.

Professional Development

A key component of enhancing this continuum of care is providing professional development for teachers and administrators to better coordinate between programs. States interested in building early learning capacity could use Title II state set-aside money to support professional development for early childhood educators and program directors for early learning best practices. Additionally, at the district level, Title II funds could be used to provide professional development opportunities for principals and school leaders to support early childhood educators teaching in their school, in addition to training that addresses students' needs in their transition to Kindergarten.

States could also apply for the Literacy Education for all Program and leverage its early learning focus. Investing early in children's literacy development will positively impact their progress and success in literacy and multiple other areas of learning.

Finally, through the National Professional Development Program, states could serve the growing population of English/Dual Language Learners in these students' earliest learning experiences in a school setting, ensuring they develop the skills they need to be successful in school and ready to enter the workforce.

Guidance should make clear the opportunities available to teachers and administrators to access best practices and professional development opportunities.

Transition to School

Another critical factor for success is creating smooth transitions from one level of schooling to the next. Well-managed transitions help children thrive and grow through their school years. Programs need to be better aligned so that children do not have to re-socialize when entering a new grade level. Current policies that encourage such alignment and related professional development for school staff should be monitored and vigorously reinforced. Title I Schools operating as "School Wide" programs are encouraged to address the transition to kindergarten in their comprehensive plans, and in doing so, schools could include strategies for promoting PreK-3rd Grade alignment and building early learning capacity that addresses developmentally appropriate model and activities for children, family, and teachers.

Additionally, Title I Schools operating as "Targeted" programs must describe how eligible students will be serviced, which may include kindergarten transition strategies. With respect to early learning, Title I Targeted programs could include in their comprehensive plans strategies for promoting PreK-3rd Grade alignment and early learning capacity that addresses developmentally appropriate assessments.

Finally, within Title I plans, States could embed early learning related policies that include strategies for helping districts and elementary schools understand and use preschool and early elementary assessments that are developmentally appropriate and aligned to state learning standards to assess school readiness.

SCAN hopes that guidance will offer strategies and best practices for these transition periods.

Flexibility in the States

States need the ability to determine how to best serve their students' diverse needs. The Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant Program (SSAEG) could be used by states and districts to support Pre-K programs. Specifically, SSAEG could be used to fund the inclusion of early learning as a focus area in the program's mandatory needs assessment. SSAEG could also be used to fund developmentally appropriate early learning projects aligned with the SSAEG's well-rounded educational element, such as STEM, music, cultural competency, language, and other enrichment activities beneficial to young learners.

SCAN was pleased with the bipartisan authorization of the Preschool Development Grants Program, which encourages strategic planning for high-quality early learning, partnerships and optimizing parent choice. As the transition process develops, SCAN will continue to provide feedback and to support the successful implementation of the first dedicated early learning federal formula funding stream within the ESEA.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback to inform guidance in state and local implementation of ESSA. SCAN looks forward to working with you in the Department's continued implementation efforts to improve access to high-quality early learning and development opportunities for children.

Warm Regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mark K. Shriver".

Mark K. Shriver
President
Save the Children Action Network

ⁱ Dearing E, Kreider H, Simpkins S, Weiss HB. Family involvement in school and low-income children's literacy: Longitudinal associations between and within families. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. 2006;98(4):653–664.