DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Vision

Children start learning from the day they are born and it is crucial that they receive quality health care, social supports, stimulation, nutrition, exercise, and nurturing environments to ensure the proper brain development that leads to academic success. All children—from birth through early education, elementary school, high school and secondary school—must receive the services necessary to achieve their full potential as a student and as an adult. These include any needed special education services, recess and physical education, proper nutrition and health education, safe environments free from bullying and harassment—particularly for lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) youth, those with special needs, and racial and ethnic minorities—and extra-curricular activities that promote a well-rounded education. The department could also promote school-based outreach and enrollment for Medicaid, the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), and other programs that can help ensure that students have health insurance to help keep them healthy and avoid prolonged absences due to sickness.

Recommended Administrative Actions

Promote physical and health education, safe environments, and other policies that foster student success. The newly enacted Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) made dramatic changes to education policy on the national level and in all 50 states. ESSA includes a beneficial focus on a “well-rounded education” and a stronger emphasis on the integration of health and education. It also includes physical education and health education, among others, as options for states to include in ESSA implementation plans. It is important, however, for the department to provide states with proper guidance in order to ensure that these areas are included in state education plans. The department should work with states to include additional content, as well, such as safe school environments, nutrition, and literacy promotion.

Expand early literacy programs. ESSA represents an intentional federal policy shift to recognize early childhood care and education as a critical piece of the educational continuum that improves long-term outcomes for poor children. It is positive that ESSA allowed Title II funding to be used for literacy education programs and grants, including the Comprehensive Literacy Program that spans both early childhood language and literacy and K-12 programs. Incorporating support for early language and literacy in early care and learning programs can help address the gap in language processing skills, which are apparent in disadvantaged children by the age of two. This large discrepancy in the number of words that children are exposed to (often labeled as the “word gap”) puts low-income children at a disadvantage when they start kindergarten. Encouraging responsive interactions between adults and young children using quality language in the course of everyday activities as well as reading to children from birth onwards is immensely important and should be highlighted in any guidance on this issue. This emphasis complements school readiness efforts throughout early childhood education settings.

Reduce rates of preschool expulsion. High-quality preschool education can be a critical beneficial factor for children. Recent data indicate, however, that expulsions and suspensions occur at high rates in preschool settings. This is particularly troubling, since research suggests that school expulsion and suspension practices are associated with negative educational and life outcomes. Not only do such expulsions and suspensions mean young children miss out on the early learning experiences they need to be ready for school, they also can result in early childhood mental health issues that can exhibit themselves as challenging behaviors going undetected and untreated. They may also mask biases in program staff that lead to racial disparities in affected children. The next administration must protect and build upon federal efforts to reduce preschool expulsion and to provide educators and families with the resources they need—including early childhood mental health consultation and the promotion of cultural competencies—to ensure high-quality early childhood education for all children.

Reduce bullying and harassment in schools. Preventing bullying, harassment, and violence in schools is of the utmost importance. Too often, LGBT students, or students who are racial and ethnic minorities, are on the receiving end of such behavior. Unfortunately, victims of such behaviors demonstrate poorer school performance, increased absenteeism, and decreased confidence and coping skills. It is imperative that all students are protected against bullying, regardless of their real or perceived race, ethnicity, age, sex, class, national origin, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, or religion. In an age in which even young children are increasingly using technology, schools must realize that prevention of bullying includes not only verbal and physical bullying in schools, but also harassment via forms of electronic communication, such as cell phones or social networking sites, known as “cyber bullying.” The next administration should provide guidance to school districts on ways to promote safe environments and reduce the incidence of bullying and harassment.
Health education. The department should expand the provision of medically accurate, comprehensive health education that includes curricula on sexual health, healthy relationships, and risk taking. Education programs should also address conflict resolution and healthy food choices and preparation.

Recommended Congressional Actions

Support programs for the most vulnerable children. With the ESSA’s passage, Congress can focus its attention on reauthorizing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This important legislation authorizes federal funding to states for early intervention services for infants and toddlers who have disabilities and developmental delays (Part C); it also authorizes special education and related services for school-aged children with disabilities (Part B). Services provided under IDEA are essential supports for children with special needs to learn and be integrated and contributing members of their communities. Congress should act immediately to reauthorize the IDEA.

Support universal access to pre-kindergarten. Congress must pass legislation establishing high-quality pre-kindergarten for all children. The quality and quantity of early education children receive has profound and long-lasting cognitive development effects. In the short-term, children who are unprepared for kindergarten are unlikely to catch up; studies have shown that the achievement gap among children entering kindergarten only widens after third grade for children with poverty- and family-related risk factors. Because of high-quality, early childhood programs’ long-term, positive effects on development, learning, health, and economic productivity, Nobel laureate James Heckman asserts that few initiatives offer a larger return on investment.

Expand access to care by supporting providers. The Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program will forgive federal direct student loans after an individual works in the government or for a non-profit for 10 years. The program assists physicians and other providers who have large amounts of student loan debt, thereby increasing their flexibility to choose under-represented subspecialties and/or work in underserved areas. Congress must protect this program as it exists now, and resist suggestions to cap the amount of loan forgiveness offered, which would disproportionately impact participants with higher debt loads and higher incomes.

Funding Priorities

Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants. The next administration must properly fund the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants, authorized by Title IV, Part A, of ESSA. This is essential to provide students with a well-rounded education, foster safe and healthy students, and support the effective use of technology. The grants will fund important steps to promote health and physical education, school mental health, drug and violence prevention, and training on trauma-informed practices, among others.

Innovative Approaches to Literacy Program. Research shows that the more words children hear directed at them by parents and caregivers, the more they learn, yet children from low-income families have significantly fewer books than their more affluent peers. In addition, researchers have found that by age four, children in poverty hear 30 million fewer words than their higher-income peers. These dramatic gaps result in significant learning disadvantages that persist into adulthood. The Innovative Approaches to Literacy Program is designed to support innovative programs that promote early literacy for young children in order to close this “word gap.” Reach Out and Read, a nonprofit organization that gives young children a foundation for success by incorporating books into pediatric care (in both private practice and hospital settings) and encouraging families to read aloud together, is just one of many programs that benefit from the program’s grants. Because of the importance of reading to children from birth, promoting literacy, and reducing the word gap, this program must be adequately funded.

About this Document

This document is an excerpt from Blueprint for Children: How the Next President Can Build a Foundation for a Healthy Future (http://aap.org/blueprint), which was produced by the American Academy of Pediatrics in September 2016 and has also been endorsed by the following organizations: the Academic Pediatric Association, the American Pediatric Society, America’s Promise Alliance, the Association of Medical School Pediatric Department Chairs, Family Voices, the National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners, the Pediatric Policy Council, the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine, the Society for Pediatric Research and ZERO TO THREE.