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Connecting All Children to High-Quality Early Care and Education:

Promising Strategies From the International Community

This brief highlights promising practices used in many European countries to ensure all children, including those from vulnerable families, have access to high-quality early care and education (ECE). These approaches can inform similar efforts in the United States to increase the participation of young children in ECE. This brief, and the accompanying report, focuses on formal, center-based care.

In the United States, participation among vulnerable children in high-quality, center-based ECE is low.

High-quality ECE provides a critical foundation for young children's success in school and in life.[1] Yet, in the United States, fewer than two out of three preschool-age children are enrolled in center-based ECE programs.[2] Children from low-income families are much less likely to receive formal ECE than their counterparts in high-income families—72% of children in families with incomes of at least twice the poverty level participate in ECE, compared with 45% of children in families with incomes below the poverty level. Although federal and state-funded ECE programs are available for low-income children, large numbers of eligible children remain unserved.

In many middle and high-income European countries, almost all preschool-age children are enrolled in a formal ECE program.

Many European countries have preschool participation rates of 95% or higher. The nearly universal preschool participation in these countries reflects national policies and expectations among parents that all children enroll in such programs. However, even in countries with near-universal ECE participation, it takes special efforts to increase or maintain high ECE participation among more vulnerable families.

We examined ECE policies and systems in a sample of European and other middle and high-income countries to identify policy approaches and program strategies that might be applied or adapted in the United States. Our conclusions are not causal—we cannot confirm that a particular strategy *caused* ECE participation to be higher in one country than another. However, the strategies highlighted here can inform ongoing efforts in the United States to ensure that high-quality ECE is available to all children.

STRATEGIES TO INCREASE ECE PARTICIPATION

- Provide strong fiscal support for universal ECE quality and affordability.
- Connect children to the ECE system early.
- Improve community connections between ECE systems and the families they serve.
- Target extra support and out-reach to immigrants and other vulnerable groups.
- Create and protect a legal entitlement to ECE for all children

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[1] This brief focuses on "formal" or "center-based" child care. U.S.-based and international research has consistently found that such care is more stable, has higher quality, and better prepares children for subsequent enrollment in school than other types of care (Bassok, Fitzpatrick, Greenberg, & Loeb, 2016). However, we realize that there is high-quality "informal" care and that many parents have good reasons to use such care (Bryson, Brewer, Sibieta, & Butt, 2012; Melhuish, 2015).

[2] This brief summarizes statistics and research findings compiled by researchers at the American Institutes for Research for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Details and references can be found in this report.

Provide Strong Financial Support to the ECE System

A major challenge to establishing and maintaining high ECE participation rates is the cost of participation to parents. Even well-established and well-funded ECE systems can expose many parents to expenses that are unaffordable for them, prompting them to look for less costly (and lower-quality) alternatives. Thus, governments seeking to increase participation in high-quality ECE among low-income parents and children must keep the cost of ECE services affordable and subsidize rates as necessary. To do so, European and other middle and high-income countries use a wide range of funding mechanisms, including tax credits, supply-side rate subsidies, vouchers, and direct public provision of free or low-cost ECE services. In addition to keeping overall expenses relatively low, most countries whose systems we studied have supplemental programs that target specific underserved groups. For example, **Denmark, Norway,** and the **United Kingdom** provide targeted subsidies to low-income parents who do not qualify for free services or who need ECE services outside of free "core" hours (typically 9 a.m.–3 p.m.). In addition to similarly supporting low-income parents, **Ireland** also subsidizes the cost of ECE for parents who are pursuing education. Some countries further stimulate enrollment of underserved children by offering additional funding to ECE service providers for enrollment of children from disadvantaged backgrounds or children with disabilities. For example, countries such as **France, Germany, New Zealand,** and **Norway** provide extra funding to service providers in areas with high percentages of minority and bilingual children, or to providers in isolated locations (New Zealand). In **Belgium,** the government directly subsidizes neighborhood services designed to increase the participation of minority children in ECE and offers low-income and immigrant families an increased family allowance if their children enroll in ECE services.

Connect Children Early to the ECE System

Several of the countries we studied that had high ECE participation have instituted policy changes and created programs to connect children to the ECE system starting at birth and continuing through preschool into elementary school. Policies that encourage parents to enroll their children into programs that connect to the ECE system early in their child's life, before preschool age, help minimize later socioeconomic differences in ECE participation and school readiness. They can also ensure that other child and family needs are addressed in a timely way. For example, in 1998, the **United Kingdom** created the Sure Start program, modeled on Head Start in the United States, which targets all age-eligible children in specific geographic areas rather than applying individual family eligibility criteria. Over time, all national early childhood education and care services in the United Kingdom were integrated under the Sure Start Unit, which enabled the UK government to promote and support an integrated ECE system. One of the original prototypes for such "horizontal integration" across the early years are the Family Centers in **Sweden,** which provide prenatal and maternal health care, child health care, day care, preschool, and other social welfare services in a single agency and location. In recent years, **Italy,** whose ECE enrollment for 3- to 5-year-olds has been almost universal for a long time, also refocused its ECE efforts on increasing enrollment among younger children. Despite the recent financial crisis, it significantly increased funding for its public *asilo nido* system, which aims to provide universal developmentally appropriate care for 0- to 3-year-olds, regardless of their parents' employment status.

Improve Community Connections Between ECE Systems and the Families They Serve

When governments and agencies seek to increase ECE participation among vulnerable families, they often find that doing so is particularly challenging among socially isolated families, immigrants, and parents who are ethnic and language minorities in the country. Different cultural norms, lack of information and connections, and mistrust of government agencies can cause parents to keep their children at home or to use informal and untrained caregivers even when high-quality government-funded alternatives are available. To address these challenges, many European and other middle- and high-income country governments and local community agencies in those countries are working to improve the connections between ECE providers and the communities they serve. These efforts include targeted initiatives to make the ECE workforce more representative of the communities it serves and to support parental engagement in the operation and management of local ECE systems. For example, several countries we studied (e.g., **Belgium, New Zealand, Norway,** and **Sweden**) explicitly mandate that service providers develop plans to increase and support parental engagement. In the **Netherlands,** parental engagement is formalized and supported through BOink, a national parents' union that represents and advocates for parents at the local and national levels and ensures that the interests and concerns of different groups of parents are heard. In **Belgium,** ECE agencies use family supporters ("gezinsondersteuners")—paid staff members recruited from local communities who provide support and advice to new parents or to parents who recently immigrated into Belgium. A significant part of their work is to connect those parents to other child and family services, including referrals to health care services, social workers, and employment agencies.

Provide Targeted ECE to Support the Integration of Immigrants and Address Inequality in Society

Universal programs create and reinforce the expectation that every child has access to high-quality ECE. Nevertheless, many European and other middle and high-income countries we studied identify specific groups of disadvantaged families for participation in ECE in an effort to facilitate the integration of immigrants and language-minority families into society. In the countries we examined, the provision of these targeted ECE services usually does not involve separate programs or specially designed services. Instead, targeted families receive preferential (and often subsidized) access to existing high-quality programs. This promotes the integration of these families (which are often immigrant families) into the larger community. A strong existing universal ECE infrastructure is a precondition for the successful implementation of such preferential programs.

A good example of this approach is the "Tinkelbel" procedure, which is used in **Belgium** to ensure the equitable enrollment of children from vulnerable groups in public child care centers. Today, in large cities in Belgium, all parents wishing to enroll their child in formal child care must contact a central office, which assigns a place to children according to specific social criteria. In so doing, the Tinkelbel procedure has replaced the usual assignment procedures, such as "first come, first served" or "priority to working families" that favored higher educated, two-income families. Tinkelbel takes into account specific priority criteria that favor single mothers, parents who speak a language other than Dutch or French, parents with low incomes, and parents in crisis situations. As a result, the procedure ensures

that the population of the municipal child care centers is a reflection of the actual population of the cities in which it is used. Procedures like these ensure that "universal" services do not reinforce existing inequality and segregation of children by socioeconomic background. Other strategies include supplemental funding or services for providers who serve children in traditionally underserved groups. For example, in **Germany,** the federal government provides dedicated grants to the states (Länder) to supplement ECE providers with additional supports to improve the language skills of immigrant children. Countries such as **Italy,** the **United Kingdom,** and **Ireland** provide special outreach to parents who are Roma (or who self-identify as gypsies or travelers).

Legal Entitlement to ECE

In many European countries, access to ECE is considered a "child's right" or a legal entitlement. This is a fundamental difference with the United States, where providing access to ECE may be considered good public policy but is not legally enforceable by federal or state policies and regulations. When ECE is defined as a legal entitlement for all children, government budget constraints and changes in public priorities are less likely to erode financial support for the ECE system. The specific policies we observed varied across countries, but large jumps in ECE participation usually followed the adoption of a universal legal entitlement to high-quality ECE. Countries vary by how and when they guarantee that every child has the right to ECE. For example, a legal entitlement to ECE begins at birth in **Denmark, Finland,** and **Sweden. Germany** and **Norway** provide such a legal entitlement beginning at 1 year of age and **Belgium** at 2½ years of age. For older children (ages 3–5 years), legal entitlement to ECE extends to many more countries we studied, including **France, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Mexico, South Korea, Spain,** and the **United Kingdom.**

To learn more and access our documentation and references, please access our full report or contact Gabriele Fain at gfain@air.org.

LEARN MORE

Below are some of the programs and resources we identified in the process of preparing this brief and the accompanying report.

The **OECD** keeps comprehensive statistics on ECE participation and other important characteristics of early childhood systems and policies in middle and high-income countries.

The **Centre for Innovation in the Early Years** helped develop the programs and policies serving vulnerable children in mainstream ECE programs in Belgium.

The **Transatlantic Forum for Inclusive Early Years** was a multiyear research and policy platform devoted to exchanging successful ECE programs and policies across Europe and North America. Its archived conference materials include detailed research and policy papers.

The **International Step by Step Association** is a European advocacy organization that has been instrumental in bringing high-quality ECE to vulnerable families and building comprehensive ECE systems, especially in Eastern Europe.

The **European Commission's Early Care and Education Department** sets program standards and provides policy advice and funding to promote ECE participation and system building across the European Union.

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