

A Roadmap to Modernize Indiana’s Early Learning System

2022 Recommendations of Indiana’s Early Learning Advisory Committee

For all of its challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated the need for reform in Indiana’s early childhood education system, while also providing the opportunity to experiment with new approaches to serve children and families in need. Tasked with reflecting on these experiences as it evaluates key components of the early learning system, the Early Learning Advisory Committee (ELAC), in deep consultation with the Family and Social Services Administration’s Office of Early Childhood and Out of School Learning (OECOSL) and the Indiana Department of Education’s Office of Kindergarten Readiness (OKR), recommends the following comprehensive roadmap to strengthen Indiana’s early learning system for decades to come.

Accomplishing this multi-year strategy will require sustained focus, cross-agency and inter-branch collaborations, and institutional courage to disrupt longstanding practices. The anticipated return on investment is an early learning system that supports these twin public policy aims:

- Ensuring that Hoosier children – especially vulnerable children – have access to early learning opportunities capable of preparing them with the foundational skills required to thrive in kindergarten and beyond.
- Ensuring that Hoosier families have convenient access to reliable and effective early learning opportunities that facilitate participation in the labor force.

ELAC will organize its work around this roadmap in 2023 to address these four over-arching priorities:

- 1. Improve learning and kindergarten readiness**
- 2. Increase the supply and sustainability of high-quality providers**
- 3. Increase affordability for families, particularly vulnerable families**
- 4. Improve and increase system capacity**

While a primary owner has been identified for each strategy below, ELAC will work with its two institutional members, OECOSL and OKR, to coordinate efforts. Together, these three entities will ensure continued alignment and transparency of progress on each of these stated priorities. The pace is aggressive, but appropriate given the necessity of reform.

Priority 1: Improve Learning and Readiness for Kindergarten

Strategy	Owner	Timing	Legislative Action	Funding Source
Define kindergarten readiness and refresh early learning standards to align to this definition.	OKR	2022/3	N	State
Build and deploy an assessment system that effectively measures all domains of early learning across the birth-to-five system.	OKR	2023/4	N	CCDBG
Update Paths to QUALITY to incorporate objective measures of quality drawn from the assessment system and to reflect current understanding of quality practices. Incentivize increased workforce compensation, lower adult-child staffing ratios, ECCE/K-12 system coordination, and job-embedded training and professional development. Promote accountability, transparency and ease of use.	ELAC	2023/4	Y	CCDBG
Following the update, require Paths to QUALITY participation for all providers receiving public funding and continue tiered reimbursement based on rating levels.	ELAC	2024	Y	N/A
Design and implement a strategy to strengthen kindergarten readiness across the full provider spectrum by incenting evidence-based curriculum usage and advanced professional development aligned to readiness standards.	OKR	2023/4	N	CCDBG
Adopt or develop data systems and technology to enable improved data analytics across the birth to school continuum and more effective evaluation to support improved kindergarten readiness.	OKR	2024	N	CCDBG & State

Priority 2: Increase the Supply and Sustainability of High-Quality Providers

Strategy	Owner	Timing	Legislative Action	Funding Source
Physical and Workforce Capacity. Increase reimbursement rates, based on costs of delivering high-quality care, to improve provider sustainability.	FSSA	2023	N	ARPA, CCDBG
Physical Capacity. Encourage and reward operational efficiency and scale for high-quality providers (e.g. by removing the expansion penalty requiring growing providers to be reimbursed as if new provider).	FSSA	2023	N	CCDBG
Physical Capacity. Create a streamlined path to enable accredited local education agencies to qualify on Paths to QUALITY in order to accept On My Way vouchers for pre-kindergarten services.	FSSA	2023/4	Y	State
Physical Capacity. Enable new models of care to meet demand, especially in hard-to-serve areas (e.g. employer and school-based microsites, family childcare home collaboratives, etc.). Follow/coordinate with statutory/regulatory changes below.	FSSA	2024	Y	CCDBG
Physical Capacity. To the extent of available funding, target financial incentives to grow capacity for high-need areas and populations.	IEDC, FSSA	2023/4	N	ARPA, State
Workforce Capacity. Design and implement a strategy to encourage new workforce training models (competency-based credentials and pathways, including career technical education in high-school) for career entry and advancement, leveraging portable and stackable credentials, apprenticeships and regional sector-based job-embedded training).	ELAC	2023	N	PDG, ARPA
Workforce Capacity. Increase scholarship supports for early childhood workers to participate in training and education programs that allow them to advance and increase compensation.	FSSA	2022-4	N	PDG, ARPA
Workforce Capacity. To the extent of available funding, use matching workforce funds or other incentives to support recruitment and competitive compensation and working conditions for effective early learning educators.	FSSA	2023	N	ARPA

Priority 3: Increase Affordability for (Particularly Vulnerable) Families

Strategy	Owner	Timing	Legislative Action	Funding Source
Expand income eligibility for Child Care and Development Fund vouchers (even temporarily) to facilitate access to high-quality early learning services and enable workforce participation. Mirroring the Build, Learn, Grow scholarship approach, implement a transparent graduated scale for co-payments to minimize funding cliffs while expanding access.	FSSA	2022/3	N	ARPA, CCDBG
Expand income eligibility and remove work requirement for On My Way Pre-K, in recognition of the program’s educational purpose. Align to K-12 voucher processes when possible for ease of administration.	FSSA	2023	Y	State
Improve business sector support through technical assistance and tax credits to employers who improve employee access to or participation in high-quality early learning. Consider national models of shared responsibility among employer, employee, and the public sector.	FSSA	2023	Y	ARPA, State

Priority 4: Improve and Increase System Capacity

Strategy	Owner	Timing	Legislative Action	Funding Source
Overall System. Be vigilant about focusing exclusively on system-level improvements that can only be carried out by government, avoiding the temptation to devote human and financial capital to programmatic changes that may be necessary, but could be implemented by others.	All	2022/4	N	N/A
Licensing. Enable blanket waivers in place of frequent variances, especially related to staffing capacity (e.g. the 21-year-old rule).	FSSA	2022	N	N/A
Licensing. Modernize the statutory and regulatory environment, in tandem, to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Seek simplicity, coherence and alignment to goals; 2. Solve safety, quality, access and similar barriers to desired results; 3. Recognize and eliminate areas of undue burdens (documentation, restrictions, processes); 4. Reconcile requirements across different provider types to eliminate inequities and reduce barriers to access; and 5. Enable waivers to regulations impeding providers’ effectiveness and sustainability. 	FSSA	2022/4	Y	PDG
Licensing. Update licensing systems to increase automation and streamline reporting, especially associated with staff compliance measures	FSSA	2024	N	CCDBG
Licensing. Refine licensing compliance with efficient and abbreviated inspections focused on key indicators, using risk-based approach to corrections	FSSA	2024	N	N/A
Eligibility Systems. Evaluate structures and processes for determining eligibility and establish user-centered systems and approaches that improve service and build equity. Institute common eligibility with other supportive programs (Medicaid, TANF, etc.).	FSSA	2023	N	PDG
Eligibility System. Establish targets for percentage of subsidies allocated through providers qualifying under “agreement center” contracts. Enable these providers to determine eligibility, so that families can have a one-stop shop. Adopt robust auditing process to avoid fraud.	FSSA	2023	N	ARPA