In 1988, the National Association of State Boards of Education’s Task Force on Early Childhood Education published *Right from the Start*, which included ambitious recommendations for improving early childhood education. Thirty years later, states have made progress in implementing the task force’s key recommendations. Yet there is much more work for state boards of education to do to achieve the task force’s stated goal that “all families get the best from early childhood education.”

NASBE convened its Task Force on Early Childhood Education in the larger context of educational reform of the 1980s, which was characterized by two competing perspectives. One focused on state-mandated testing and increased graduation requirements, in response to the alarm sounded by the publication in 1983 of *A Nation at Risk*. The second saw this press for increased standards and accountability as overshadowing the developmental needs of the youngest children and skewing curriculum in inappropriate ways. *Right from the Start* fell squarely in this camp, arguing that “if education is seen as a contest that pits children against their peers, or a race against our foreign competitors, we risk teaching very young children the wrong academic tasks in an inappropriate fashion before they are ready.”

NASBE’s convening of national, state, school, and early childhood education leaders for a year of study culminated in a policy agenda for strengthening early childhood programs and the early learning grades. The report offered two broad recommendations:

- develop and promote “early childhood units” within schools to better meet learning needs of children ages 4 to 8 and sustain gains made in high-quality pre-K; and

- invest in partnerships between schools and community service agencies to support a comprehensive approach to early childhood services that encompasses education for children and parents, mental and physical health, and family supports.

The report also urged state leaders to advocate for new early childhood investments, saying that expanding access to high-quality early learning programs and developing the capacity of schools to support and deliver them are crucial. Although the context has evolved, these recommendations remain relevant today. The task force’s full set of recommendations (box 1) have found their way into state and local policies, even as states have yet to ensure that every child experiences a great early education.

### Changing Social and Economic Landscape

Since the task force convened, the United States has experienced significant demographic shifts. The National Center on Education Statistics projects that students of color outnumbered non-Hispanic white students in American schools for the first time in 2014–15.1 In coming decades, the U.S. populace is expected to become even more diverse.2

The economy also has shifted, with rising inequality and persistently high rates of child poverty, stagnant wages for many workers, and a weak system of social support. Today one in five U.S. children lives in poverty, a rate higher than most industrialized countries.3
The Great Recession exacerbated pressures in many communities and adversely affected children. Though the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act invested substantially in health and education, such infusions were temporary, and few states have reached pre-recession levels of education spending.4

Against this evolving backdrop, more young children are receiving care from those who are not relatives—especially center-based care—than in decades past, driven in part by rising parental workforce participation, especially among mothers.5 Many states also have made or expanded investments in early childhood education, creating new opportunities for children to attend programs before kindergarten.

Evolving Research

Research into early childhood development has evolved both in nature and context. This

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**Box 1. Right from the Start Policy Recommendations**

The NASBE Task Force on Early Childhood Education made the following state policy recommendations to realize the “new vision of early childhood education.”

**Promoting the Early Childhood Unit**

- Sponsor experiments to test different models of the early childhood unit.
- Review and improve state policies related to curriculum and teaching in the early school years.
- Review and improve state policies related to the assessment and testing of young children.
- Review and improve state policies related to parent involvement and family support services.
- Review and improve policies on the training and certification of staff for early childhood programs.
- Sponsor efforts to inform and educate parents and citizens on the characteristics and benefits of high quality early education.
- Provide additional resources for implementation of the early childhood unit.

**Promoting Collaboration in Early Childhood Services**

- Creating systems for state agency collaboration in planning, standard-setting, and program development.
- Build systems to encourage early childhood programs and professionals to help each other.
- Provide funding and incentives to support local collaboration in early childhood services.
- Support recruitment efforts to increase the supply and stability of the early childhood workforce.

**Financing Early Childhood Services**

- Promote early childhood funding as an investment opportunity.
- Understand the importance of quality in developing programs
- Promote equity and access to early childhood services
- Utilize a blend of federal, state, local and parental support.

NASBE created its Early Childhood Network in 2006 to test models for the early childhood unit and strategies to align instruction in the early years. Over three years, state teams worked to define and ensure preschool quality, develop early learning standards, increase requirements for early childhood teachers, and eventually to align the preK-3 system. A recent study of early learning approaches in Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts revealed that while each state took a different path to unifying early learning and early elementary, common themes emerged:

- New structures and patterns of collaboration across the state agencies charged with early childhood education, birth to age 5, and K-3 instruction needed to be established.
- Incentives were needed for aligning local policy and practice from birth to grade 3, either through grants or with dedicated funding and support to local entities.
- State policy should be balanced against local flexibility to support innovation and responsiveness to local needs while fulfilling the state role for accountability and oversight.

Building Community-Based Systems

Right from the Start called for elementary schools to form partnerships with preschool programs to better support children and families. Research indicates that continuity in learning is critical for all children, and it says that schools’ structure and partnerships with parents and community organizations contribute to vital, dynamic development and learning across the age span.

Successful community-based early childhood systems (1) identify a comprehensive vision and common goals for early education, (2) establish a diverse cross-sector governance structure, and (3) collect data to drive decision making and accountability. Sustaining these efforts and their impact requires intentional, relentless attention to the organizational and operational mechanics of the collaboration. While empirical research on educational impact is limited, it appears that state and local partnerships focused on increasing bidirectional communication and shared understanding of partner needs and expectations result in streamlined...
in elementary school can serve as charging stations for sustaining and amplifying pre-K learning gains.”

State boards can provide leadership and build momentum toward making early childhood education a priority in their states. Several state boards have done so, tackling pre-K financing, teacher and principal preparation and licensure, and assessment.

In the 1990s, the West Virginia Board of Education adopted policy in support of providing high-quality full-day kindergarten, and in 2002 it mandated that all counties provide "universal access to a quality early education system.” County collaborative teams now administer local pre-K programs in mixed-delivery settings, and the state ensures stable, dedicated funds through the state's school funding formula. The state blends federal and state funds at the state level while incentivizing local providers to partner with Head Start and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families to expand access.

In 2012, the state board established an office of early learning for preK-5 within the state’s department of education and convened a cross-sector advisory committee. It also adopted a policy to support a comprehensive approach to closing the third grade literacy achievement gap and joined the National Campaign for Grade Level Reading to provide resources to local districts to address that gap. In 2016, West Virginia became one of just six states that the National Institute for Early Education Research named as meeting all 10 of its quality benchmarks. Robert E. Hull, former assistant superintendent of schools in West Virginia and now executive vice president at NASBE, attributes the success of the state's early learning initiative to the state board "strategically and intentionally utilizing their three primary levers of authority—the power of policy, the power of the question, and the power to convene.”

The Illinois State Board of Education redesigned principal licensure to require preparation in early childhood education, which is woefully absent from most principal licensure programs. In Colorado and many other states, the state board has required kindergarten entry assessments to inform teaching and learning.

For the first time in federal education policy, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) strongly
emphasizes early learning. ESSA provides openings for state boards to drive increased access to high-quality early learning programs, align and coordinate birth to grade 3, and prepare and support highly effective teachers. Michigan, for example, is developing a statewide professional development system for educators serving children birth to age 8 and is using Title II dollars to develop on-demand professional development models. Louisiana plans to use Title II funds to support district preparation partnerships and the development of competency-based teacher preparation programs.

State boards can provide momentum and urgency to their states’ efforts to invest early in children’s learning. Right from the Start offered a blueprint—still relevant today—to chart the way forward. Acting on the opportunities before them, state boards can enhance early learning and support the success of their young learners. As child development expert Joan Lombardi, who in 1988 was NASBE senior staff associate and with Tom Schultz led the Task Force on Early Childhood Education, put it: “Reflecting back should renew our commitment to move forward with renewed energy and commitment since in so many ways the recommendations were indeed Right from the Start.”

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