



“Learning begins at birth, and the preparation for learning begins before birth. The investment we make as a nation in early learning will pay dividends for generations to come. Decades of research tell us that from infants and toddlers to preschoolers, early learning is the best investment we can make to prepare our children for a lifetime of success.”—HELP Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA)

HELP Chairman Tom Harkin Introduces the *Strong Start for America’s Children Act*

Bill Summary

The Strong Start for America’s Children Act builds on the framework put forward by President Obama in his 2013 *State of the Union Address* and reflects Chairman Tom Harkin’s longstanding commitment to ensuring that learning begins at birth. This proposal would greatly increase access to and quality of programs that serve children from birth to kindergarten.

This bill consists of four measures that would:

- Accelerate states’ efforts to provide high-quality preschool to low and moderate income families;
- Increase the quality of infant and toddler care in center-based and family child care settings;
- Support quality improvements in the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG); and
- Encourage continued support for the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program.

TITLE I - PRESCHOOL FOR ALL

Preschool Formula Program: This would authorize a formula program to states for the purpose of providing universal, voluntary pre-kindergarten. States will distribute funds to local entities – which may include districts, schools, Head Start programs or licensed child care providers – that meet high-quality standards. Funds would be disbursed based on a state’s share of four-year olds living at or below 200% of the poverty line. States or local entities would first have to provide universal access to four-year olds before serving three-year olds.

States would have the ability to reserve up to 15% of the formula funds they receive to serve infants and toddlers through high-quality providers – if states chose to exercise this option they would have to ensure that infants and toddlers would enter into the state’s high-quality pre-kindergarten programs once they reached age three.

Preschool Development Grant Program: This would authorize competitive grants solely for states not receiving preschool formula grants. The purpose would be to increase capacity in states to position them for preschool formula grants and to improve states’ systems of early childhood. The Department of Education would make awards to help: 1) states with small state-funded preschool programs expand such programs; or 2) states without any state-funded preschool programs to establish them.

TITLE II - EARLY LEARNING QUALITY PARTNERSHIPS

This would authorize \$4 billion for Early Head Start-child care partnerships. Early Head Start providers, which serve infants and toddlers, would partner with local center-based and family child care to improve the quality of their infant and toddler care. These partnerships would be funded through the existing Early Head Start

competitive process and will serve one in five children living at or below poverty; currently Early Head Start serves less than one in 25 children living at or below poverty. Funds would be allocated to states based on their share of infants and toddlers living at or below poverty.

TITLE III – QUALITY IMPROVEMENTS: CCDBG

This title includes statutory changes to CCDBG that would provide formula grants to states to increase the standards in federally-subsidized child care to improve the health, safety, and school readiness of children that benefit from such care. Funds would be used to help States raise the bar on quality, including through:

- Training, scholarships, and other professional development for child care staff;
- Compensation improvement strategies for the workforce, including through rewards or bonuses, linked to increased credential or degree completion;
- Technical assistance to help providers become licensed and comply with licensing and regulatory requirements; and
- Improving health and safety standards.

States applying for these funds would provide assurances that funds would be prioritized first in areas with significant concentrations of poverty and unemployment and that lack access to high-quality early care and education programs, or for otherwise underserved populations such as homeless children, or children with disabilities or special needs. Grants would be in an amount no less than \$100 million and would only be authorized if discretionary appropriations for the program met or exceeded \$2.4 billion.

TITLE IV – SENSE OF THE SENATE: MIECHV

This title includes provisions expressing what current research has indicated for more than a decade: from the prenatal period to the first day of kindergarten, children's development rapidly progresses at a pace exceeding that of any subsequent stage of life; nearly half of infants and toddlers live in homes with a family income of less than 200% of the federal poverty level; and it is the duty of Congress to support the healthy development of our nation's most at-risk children in their earliest years.

The title also recognizes the historic importance of providing continued, robust funding to the MIECHV program so that children and families can continue to receive access to high-quality, evidence-based, voluntary home visiting programs.

For more information, please visit <http://www.harkin.senate.gov> or contact any of Senator Harkin's offices in Washington, D.C. or Iowa.