

## United States

### Auspices

Because of its constitutional history, size and diversity, the US has no single, comprehensive national child or family policy. Public education is primarily a state responsibility. The Federal Government plays an important role, however, through Congress, which formulates ECEC policies and goals, focusing primarily on funding services to children considered “at risk”. Most funding for social services (including the Head Start programme, which is also educational) is managed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), while the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) funds compensatory and special education for disadvantaged 3- to 5-year olds. As part of “welfare reform” through the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, the government has provided additional funding to the states to expand provision of childcare, as an incentive to welfare recipients to find work.<sup>59</sup> Four separate child care funding streams have been consolidated into a single Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF). At each state level, policy decisions are made with regard to eligibility, extent of the supply and availability of services, allocation of services and benefits, scope and quality of services, including health and safety standards. The states use legislation, supplemental funding and regulation to implement policy decisions. In the last decade, states have also taken the leadership role in developing and implementing pre-kindergarten services and early intervention services for young children at risk. The allocation of resources and policies vary greatly across and within the states. Some states encourage local government and community participation in the development of early childhood policies through the formation of localised planning groups, matching funding and the development of local plans as a criteria for state funding. Other states assume near complete fiscal, regulatory and policymaking responsibilities for early childhood education and care.

### Developments

Public awareness campaigns, strong advocacy, and internationally-renowned research have helped to secure a place for ECEC on the political agenda in the United States. There has been a marked increase in political commitment and investment both at the federal and state levels, with concomitant expansion of funding and coverage of ECEC provision. Head Start appropriations have increased significantly in the last decade, with additional increases expected. In particular, federal money has been made available to States to expand and improve quality childcare through increased funding from the CCDF block grant. There are moves toward universal access to pre-kindergarten programmes in many states. Several multi-agency, state-wide initiatives have been developed to promote co-ordination and collaboration among state government and local government, non-profit organisations, businesses, and families. Likewise, numerous state initiatives have developed to address the question of quality, and there have been significant improvements in regulations for in-service training. Professional organisations, including the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), have played an important role in promoting voluntary accreditation and professional development for early childhood staff.

### Context

*Expenditure on ISCED Level 0 institutions as a percentage of GDP:* 0.4%. The figures provided in the US background report suggest a much smaller percentage, especially in term of public investment.

*Labour force rates:* in 1999, 76.4% of women aged 25-34 years participated in the labour force. 19% worked part-time. 58% of women with a child under 1 year were part of the labour force (Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2000).

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59. The Temporary Assistance of Needy Families (TANF) Act requires that adults should participate in work activities two years after they start receiving assistance. States may exempt parents with children under one year from work requirement, and cannot penalize parents with children under 6 years if child care is not available.

*Parental leave:* the 1993 *Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)* provides for a 12 week job-protected but unpaid leave for employees in firms with 50 or more workers, at the time of pregnancy, childbirth, or their own illness or that of a family member. Employers can require that employees use their vacation and sick leave before claiming the family leave. Some paid maternity leave depending on workplace agreement.

*Attention to children with special educational needs before they begin compulsory schooling:* a) *Children with disabilities:* Federal law requires that centres catering for children should accommodate children with disabilities in “the least restrictive environment”. Depending on the state, there is growing inclusion of such children. 10% of available places in Head Start are intended for children with disabilities (the actual percentage of children with disabilities in Head Start programmes is 12%); b) *Children from low-income families:* the child poverty rate in the U.S. is 22.4% after redistribution (OECD average: 11.9%). In 1997, 40% of African American, 38% of Hispanic, and 13% of white, non-Hispanic children under 6 lived in poverty (UNICEF, 2000); c) *Ethnic and bilingual children:* in the U.S., there are significant ethnic and immigrant groups: 15% African-Americans; 15% Hispanic; 4% Asia/Pacific and 1% indigenous American.

## Provision

Private centre-based ECEC and family day care (90% of provision – two-thirds non-profit and one-third for-profit) is the most usual form of provision up to the age of 3 years, giving way gradually to publicly-funded kindergarten provision by the school districts from the age of 4. Rates of provision are:

*0-1 year:* about 20% of children are cared for by parents on a full-time basis; more than half are cared for by a relative or in-home child-minder; 22% are in private family day-care and 9% in centre-based settings, generally from the age of 3 months.

*2-4 years:* provision is characterised by decreasing at-home, informal care (39%) and increasing use of both centre-based settings (19% of 2-year olds and 41% of 3-year olds are in centre-based settings), and pre-primary education programmes (48% of 3-year-old children enrolled, mostly in private, part-day, nursery school programmes).

*4-6 years:* more than 60% of 4-year olds are enrolled in educational programmes in nursery schools (some kindergarten). Georgia and New York State have pledged to provide full and free coverage for 4-year olds in public, part-day pre-kindergarten. In 41 other States, some form of free pre-kindergarten to 4-year olds is found, sometimes extending to 3-year old children. This form of provision is expanding rapidly. Almost all (90%) 5-year olds are enrolled in kindergartens, the first year of formal schooling (85% public).

Where childcare is concerned, families pay on average about 60% of costs (rising to 70-80% of costs outside the school system), with Federal Government contributing 25%, and States and local government about 15% of costs.<sup>60</sup> Depending on the State, parents pay on average more than \$3 000 annually per child for childcare, with low-income families paying on average 18% of income, and families earning less than \$1 200 per month paying 25% of income. Some costs can be recuperated through Federal tax benefits for parents. Low-income families can benefit from fee subsidies through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) block grant, but many low-income families tend to use informal, unregulated arrangements. Most school districts offer free half- or full-day kindergarten to all 5-year olds as part of formal primary schooling, and an increasing number of districts are now offering free pre-kindergarten to 4-year olds.

*Child-staff ratios:* different State regulations and different standards in licensing requirements; funding standards; voluntary accreditation standards and voluntary goals standards make it difficult to describe child-staff ratios for the U.S. as a whole. In general: ratios of 4-6:1 are required for infants; from 10 to 20:1 for pre-school children, with 2- and 3-year old children having ratios somewhere in the middle. However, because of the predominance of informal settings, particularly for younger children from low-income families, and the inability of many States to inspect centres and family day care homes regularly, the actual child-staff ratios can be much higher. In fact, only 14% of centres and 13% of family child care homes are rated as being of good quality.

## Staffing and training

In the United States, the status and pay of early childhood staff outside the public school system are low, and staff turnover is three times higher than among school teachers. No coherent system exists to set the qualifications of early childhood workers. The characteristics of the three main provision systems are:

*Head Start:* to raise the level of staff training, Head Start has relied heavily on funding standards (called the Head Start Performance Standards) and from 1971, created its own professional profile, the Child Development

60. The above Federal and State contributions are mainly directed to programmes for low-income families and to children considered to be “at risk”, e.g. Head Start, which covered 700 000 (36% of eligible children) three- and 4-year old children in 1998.

Associate (CDA). The CDA is equivalent (depending on the State) to half a two-year, tertiary-level, professional diploma or associate degree. It is widely recognised across the US and provides credits for a university degree in several States. The aim of Head Start (almost achieved) is to have one CDA in every classroom, while Congress recently enacted a law requiring Head Start to have 50% of its contact staff to have a two-year degree or four-year post-secondary degree by 2003.

*The public school system:* teachers in all (pre-)kindergarten classes are required to be certified by the State in which they work. However, a specialisation in early childhood is not required in all States. Teacher certification is based on a four-year university degree, and often a Master's degree. It is not always a requirement for working in private schools, nor, in some States, for working with young children in a public school.

*The purchase-of-service system:* the large purchase-of-service system is composed of private centres and family day care homes which are licensed by state social service agencies to provide programmes for the general population. These services are subject to licensing and funding standards, but pre-service staff requirements can be very low or non-existent. Most States, however, now require a certain number of annual hours of further training from all staff.

### OECD policy issues

Among the issues for policy attention identified by the OECD Review team for the US were:

*The need to create a co-ordinated and comprehensive ECEC system:* the present patchwork of services, regulations and funding sources leads to confusion, uneven quality and inequality of access. The responsibility to provide political leadership, funding, clear policy goals and frameworks rests with government, both at Federal and the State level. An effective first step might be the nomination of a national commission to propose how government roles in ECEC could be strengthened. Stronger implication by education departments may be vital for creating a more equitable system with broad public support. Stable networks of inter-agency partnerships at the State level could also be effective.

*The urgent need to address access issues:* the access of children 3-5 years from ethnic and low-income backgrounds is a serious concern. Only 45% of children from 3-5 years from low-income families are enrolled in pre-school, compared to 75% among high-income families. These inequalities are often linked to contextual issues, such as housing policy, which tends to support segregation of families by income and ethnic origin. A more proactive stance toward child poverty and diversity is recommended.

*The need for quality improvement:* quality in childcare can be very weak, especially for the 0-3 age group, and regulations in many States may set standards far too low, even for health and safety issues. In addition, families of 4-year old children often have access only to narrowly focused, instructional type programmes. Voluntary accreditation of centres as proposed by the NAEYC can dramatically improve standards and the use of well-known methods, (e.g. the Project Approach) or guidelines (e.g. the revised *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs*) can contribute significantly to the effectiveness of programmes.

*Creating an effective staff training and professional development system:* serious weaknesses occur in the initial and continued training of staff at all levels. In addition, concerns were expressed about recruitment, remuneration, status, retention and career development. Projects such as TEACH address many of these issues. The articulation of qualifications and staff licensing within and across states is also a challenge.