

# The NGA Center for Best Practices Governors' Forum on Quality Preschool

Orlando, Florida  
December 15-16, 2003

On December 15 and 16, the NGA Center for Best Practices held the *Governors' Forum on Quality Preschool*, which Governor Jeb Bush of Florida hosted in Orlando. The Forum presented an unprecedented occasion for governors to discuss the opportunities and challenges they face in promoting high quality learning experiences for young children. Attending governors included

- *Governor Jeb Bush (Florida)*
- *Governor Jim Doyle (Wisconsin)*
- *Governor Jennifer Granholm (Michigan)*
- *Governor Dirk Kempthorne (Idaho)*
- *Governor Judy Martz (Montana)*

## State Teams

Twenty-three teams of high level state policy decision makers participated in this 2-day event to share best practices and discuss issues in-depth with national experts. Team members included First Ladies, Lieutenant Governors, governors' education policy advisors, state superintendents of education, state health and human services commissioners, state legislators, foundation and business leaders, and other influential decision makers.

## Proceedings and Key Themes

Details on the meeting are now available on the NGA website ([www.nga.org](http://www.nga.org), search on "early childhood"), including the agenda, briefing papers, speaker biographies, and the remarks and presentation slides from over twenty presenters.

The opening session featured a Governors' Roundtable with experts from the education, research, business and policy communities. Ray Suarez, Senior Correspondent, The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, moderated. The participants discussed the following key themes and messages about quality preschool:

- Early childhood (birth to five) is a critical time for the development of cognitive, physical, social, and linguistic skills, and high quality preschool programs are a proven strategy to narrowing the achievement gap. Quality is defined by qualified teachers, research-based curriculum, small class sizes, appropriate evaluation and accountability measures, and the infrastructure to support them.
- Gubernatorial leadership is critical to establishing quality preschool as a state priority. Governors can develop and promote a vision for early learning, and encourage collaboration among parents, educators, policymakers, the business and foundation communities, and other key stakeholders.
- Parents are children's first and most important teachers, and policies and programs should support them in this role.
- A high quality preschool workforce is critical, yet developing one poses challenges that will require significant attention, planning and collaboration among policymakers, educators, high education, and other stakeholders.

- Building public and political will is necessary for increasing investments in quality preschool. Measuring the impact of quality programs is critical to building support and creating a sense of urgency around this issue.

Additional themes emerged from the team sessions, including:

- Financing quality preschool is a significant challenge in the current fiscal environment, but states can investigate ways to leverage existing state, local, and private sector funding and begin to plan now for the future.
- Building a quality preschool “movement” requires a strong coalition of public and private partners at the state and local level. It also requires significant outreach efforts to parents, communities and the public.
- Governance over early learning initiatives that involve a range of agencies, funding sources, and decision makers is a critical aspect to state planning. Many states are investigating collaborative governance structures that involve a range of high level stakeholders to raise preschool as a priority and clearly define roles.
- Universal preschool (programs that are available to all children regardless of income) is a goal that many states are interested in working toward in order to ensure that all children have equal access to high quality early learning opportunities.
- Because the first five years of life are all critical to children’s learning and development, policies that address the needs of parents and children before preschool are equally important.

By the end of the 2-day event, the state teams had identified key actions to be taken back home, which included:

- Measuring public opinion and developing public awareness campaigns on quality preschool and early learning.
- Building coalitions and relationships with higher education, k-12 education, advocates, foundations, businesses, parents, providers, and policymakers.
- Establishing an advisory group, task force, or governance body to develop recommendations for quality preschool. In many cases this is to be done within a broader (birth to five) early childhood policy agenda and/or incorporated into a state’s P-16 education plan.
- Developing appropriate early learning standards for preschool and child care, and designing assessments to measure results.

### **Next Steps**

The NGA Center for Best Practices will be following up with states that attended the Forum to offer guidance and assistance as they move forward on their early learning plans. The Center is seeking additional support from the foundation community to continue work in this area. Governors and their advisors interested in discussing how the Center can be of assistance should contact Anna Lovejoy, Senior Policy Analyst in the Center for Best Practices at 202-624-5331 or [alovejoy@nga.org](mailto:alovejoy@nga.org).