

FROM EVIDENCE TO EFFECTIVE POLICIES: HOW TO INVEST IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TO NURTURE CHILDREN'S POTENTIAL

This brief is a summary of the chapter of the same name written by Magdalena Bendini, Amanda E. Devercelli, Elaine Ding, Melissa Kelly and Adelle Pushparatnam, in Bendini, Magdalena, and Amanda E. Devercelli, editors. 2022. *Quality Early Learning: Nurturing Children's Potential*. Human Development Perspectives. Washington, DC: World Bank.



The promise of, and challenges to, realizing quality early childhood education

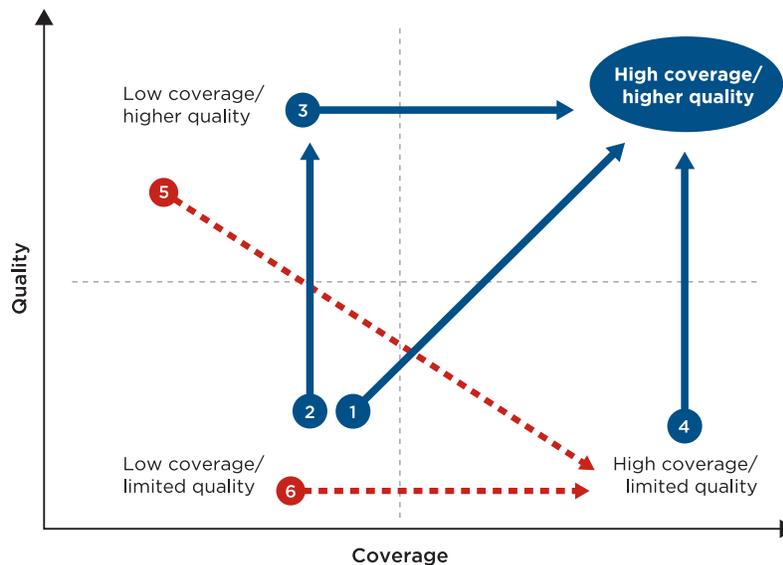
Quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) harnesses children's natural ability and motivation to learn, and fosters cognitive and socioemotional skills, executive function, and motivation. A strong foundation can pave the way for a virtuous cycle of skill acquisition and productivity throughout life.¹ Quality ECE can help build human capital, set children on higher developmental trajectories, and address early disadvantages and inequality. Investments in quality ECE help increase productivity in subsequent education levels, with children who have attended ECE demonstrating higher attendance and better achievement. They are also less likely to repeat, drop out, or require remedial or special education.²

Despite the documented high rates of return for quality ECE, access globally remains insufficient and unequal. While 62 percent of children are now enrolled in ECE worldwide—a 29-percentage point increase since 2000—just 20 percent of those enrolled are in low-income countries, with substantial in-country variation based on factors such as socioeconomic status or geographic location.³ Deep underfunding and fragmentation undermine ECE's potential. In 2017, the global average of domestic education budgets to ECE was below 7 percent, with 40 percent of countries with available data spending less than 2 percent. Absent from many education systems are effective policy, institutional arrangements, financing plans, regulatory and quality assurance frameworks, and proper alignment with primary education, all important to realizing the promise of ECE.⁴

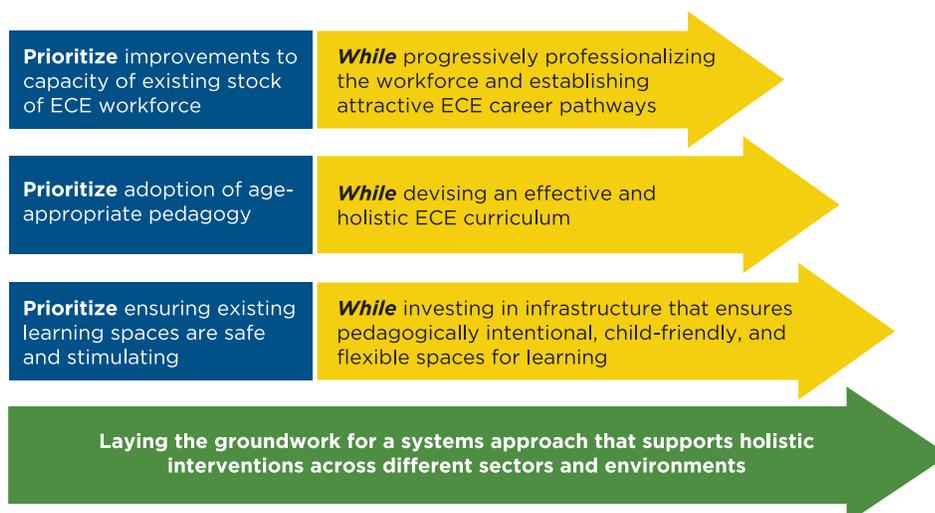
Building sustainable quality ECE

To successfully build quality ECE, policy and program implementation should be grounded in promoting child learning above other imperatives. Resources are always limited; thus, systems face trade-offs not only between the expansion and quality of coverage, but across crucial elements of quality and between short- and longer-term goals. As governments assess how much can be achieved in the short, medium, and long run, they should take care to consistently *balance expansion with quality, invest in learning first, and build systems that deliver quality early learning*.

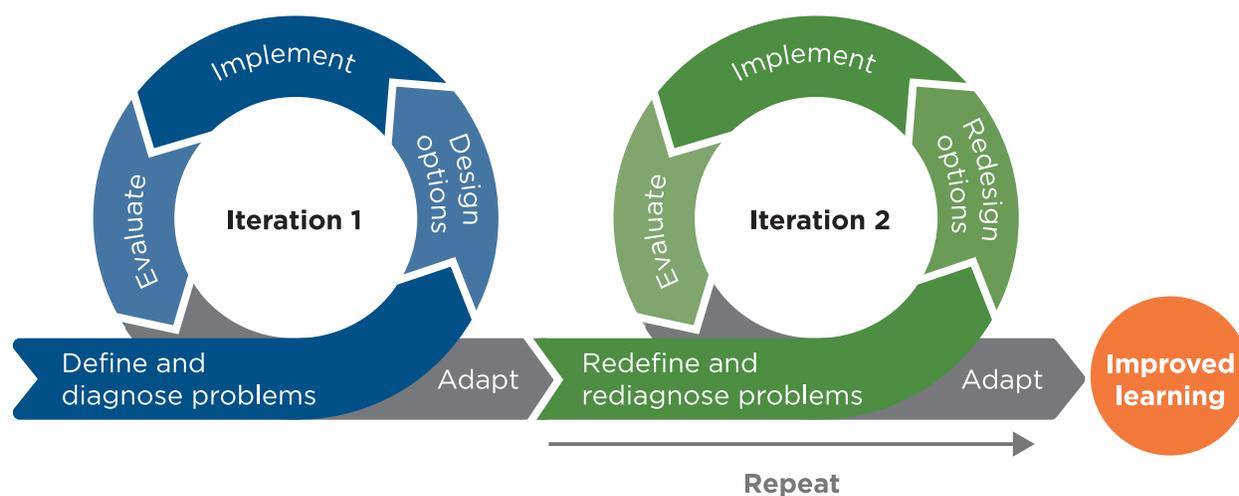
Balance expansion with quality. The recent expansion of access to ECE has the potential to lift many children's early learning trajectories. But overly ambitious targets risk compromising quality, resulting in negligible or even detrimental effects on learning.⁵ Quality can be harder to achieve at scale and often decreases as systems expand – standards may be harder to uphold or systems may struggle to secure the workforce needed to meet growing service provision. Countries should balance ECE expansion with quality, and not expand beyond the point where they can guarantee a minimum level of quality that enables child learning. Pathways to expanding access to quality ECE vary, depending on countries' starting points, possibilities, and aspirations (figure below). But promoting child learning at scale should always be prioritized. Expansion strategies should also prioritize children from disadvantaged families because they benefit the most from quality ECE.⁶ Governments can leverage the nonstate sector and engage with local providers to increase access, particularly in hard-to-reach areas. As ECE expands, the state must maintain responsibility for quality assurance and put systems in place to ensure quality across nonstate and public sector provision to ensure all children benefit.



Invest in learning first. Quality ECE is built progressively, requiring simultaneous investments across the range of ECE elements over time. While working toward long-term objectives, countries should also ensure that short- to medium-term ECE provision achieves a minimum level of quality to benefit children enrolled today. Key investments to improve children's learning outcomes include: improving ECE educators' capacity; coherence between curricula, age-appropriate pedagogical approaches, and teacher professional development; safe and stimulating learning spaces; and manageable child-to-teacher ratios and group sizes.⁷



Build systems that deliver quality early learning. While ensuring minimum conditions for learning are in place, countries should invest in laying the groundwork for a systems approach to achieve sustainable quality early learning at scale. A systems approach to ECE may also facilitate coordination with other services that support early learning, such as health and social protection. Building systems that deliver quality early learning takes time, planning, and multiple investments, and requires an honest assessment of the current status and key challenges for ECE, a review of available resources (human, financial and systemwide), and an articulation of objectives to expand access to quality ECE in the short, medium, and long run. Importantly, achieving sustainable, quality early learning at scale requires a resourced national ECE plan and dedicated financial commitments. Building such a system entails developmentally appropriate learning standards and regulatory frameworks. This should be grounded in continuously monitored quality assurance efforts that identify what works in the local context and address bottlenecks to implementation.



Promoting early learning beyond ECE

In addition to ECE, parental engagement and learning resources available at home and the community greatly influence children's learning outcomes.⁸ Early learning interventions that target home and community environments help promote resilience and equity while improving learning outcomes for all children. ECE interventions can empower parents to make decisions about their children's early learning, help them improve the quality of their parenting practices and interactions at home, and increase parental involvement with the formal learning environment. Public learning spaces supplement the school and home learning environments by increasing resources available to all children. Because child development should be approached holistically,⁹ investments to improve early learning can be complemented by efforts to improve other crucial aspects such as health, nutrition, child protection, and social protection.

Expanding ECE presents countries with an opportunity to address inequality and build human capital for the future. There is no other time in life during which the brain is as sensitive to learning opportunities, potentially allowing ECE investments to yield a lifetime of benefits. Yet ECE leads to learning only when its quality is sufficient; the pace of ECE expansion, therefore, must be conditioned on the speed at which a minimum level of quality can be ensured. Many countries have a unique window of opportunity now to establish quality ECE while access is still relatively low, and to build systems that can ensure quality as access grows. Getting this right early—both in the early years of children's lives and in the early years of setting up an ECE system—is easier than fixing problems later. Thus, as ECE expands, governments should keep a strong focus on quality to foster effective and equitable child learning.

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