EDUCARE
LEARNING NETWORK

A National Research Agenda for Early Education

Executive Summary

BUILDING A NATIONAL BODY OF EVIDENCE ON EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

The Educare Learning Network—a nationwide network of high-quality early childhood education schools—is committed to demonstrating that research-based early education can prevent the persistent achievement gap faced by our nation's young children living in low-income communities. But true progress toward closing this gap will require the mobilization of research to elucidate the best practices and inspire the innovations that will support children and families in low-income households to achieve their full potential. To that end, the Educare Learning Network has identified urgent and compelling research priorities for the early education field and articulated them in this research agenda.

The intent of the research agenda is to catalyze new research not only in the Educare Learning Network, but in diverse early learning settings nationwide. Once documented, evaluated, and supported by research evidence, newly discovered best practices can be shared broadly to improve early education programs across the country, and in turn, meaningfully impact the lives of young children and their families.

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Through a coast-to-coast network of state-of-the-art, full-day, year-round schools, funded mostly by existing public dollars, Educare serves at-risk children from birth to 5 years. The Educare Learning Network currently consists of 20 operating Educare Schools in diverse communities, serving approximately 3,000
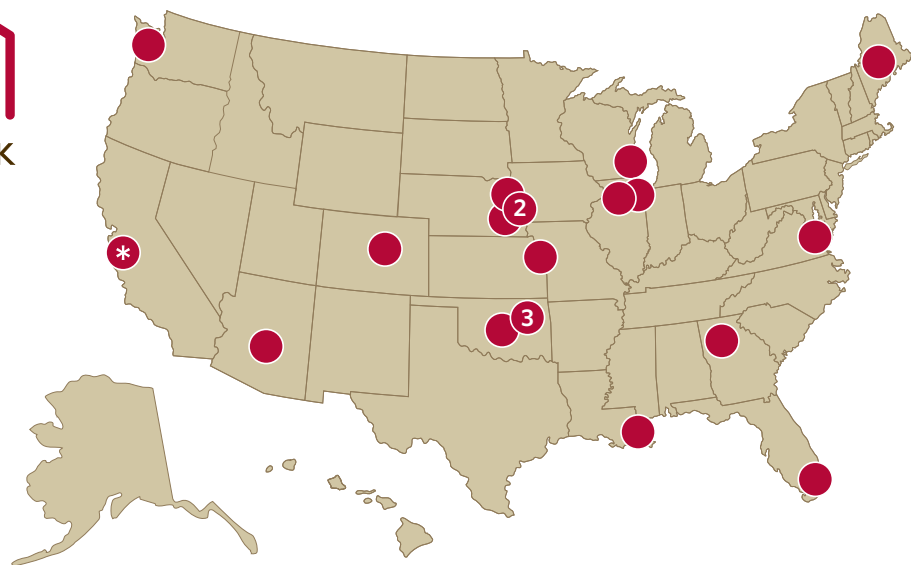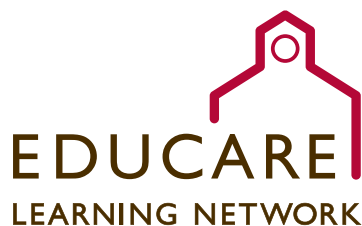
children and guiding professional development for 750 early childhood staff. Each Educare School embraces a community's most vulnerable children with programming and instruction that develop early skills and support the strong parent-child relationships that create the foundation for successful learning. Educare Schools use evidence-based approaches to foster children's learning, engage families and enhance teacher quality, with the goal of improving child and family trajectories and outcomes. The Educare model theory of change includes four core domains of practice—data utilization, embedded professional development, high-quality teaching practices and intensive family engagement—that in the context of strong leadership and linkages to community partners aim to enhance achievement and overall well-being among Educare children and families.

The research agenda highlights gaps in knowledge and practice and articulates research questions with significant potential to benefit the field. In particular, the agenda proposes interdisciplinary research to advance knowledge about four core domains of practice, which evidence suggests are active ingredients in preparing young children to succeed in school and life.

Data Utilization

Data utilization is a critical component in advancing children's learning and developmental outcomes and in partnering with families to achieve their goals. In recent years, the early childhood field and the systems that support and govern it have placed an increased emphasis on data collection and data use for purposes of program improvement and monitoring. But despite this growing expectation of data utilization, there is as yet only an emerging body of evidence on effective models of data utilization in early childhood

Chicago	Tulsa at MacArthur	Kansas City, KS	Atlanta
Omaha at Kellom	Denver	Central Maine (Waterville)	Lincoln, NE
Omaha at Indian Hill	Miami-Dade	Arizona (Phoenix)	New Orleans
Milwaukee	Oklahoma City	Washington, DC	Winnebago, NE
Tulsa at Kendall-Whittier	Seattle	West DuPage, IL	Silicon Valley (San Jose)*
Tulsa at Hawthorne			

* Opening in 2015

As of February 2014

education. The agenda therefore proposes engaging in research that advances the knowledge base on effective data utilization practices in a variety of early education settings.

Embedded Professional Development

As the early childhood field strives to improve practice and classroom quality, sustainable and effective professional development will be a critical lever in ensuring the early childhood workforce has the support and capacity to improve outcomes for young children and families. Decades of research on adult learning suggests that across diverse settings, effective professional development must build knowledge, support the transfer of that knowledge to practice, and facilitate ongoing collaboration to examine and improve that practice. Yet there remains a dearth of research exploring the relationships between adult learning and work environments, professional development models, and teaching and child outcomes in early education settings. This research agenda puts forth a commitment to measuring and monitoring the impacts of embedded professional development on improving practice.

High-Quality Teaching Practices

A large body of evidence demonstrates that effective early education teaching practices include emotionally supportive, organized and instructionally challenging interactions. But various gaps remain in critical research areas. The research agenda therefore identifies exploration into high-quality teaching practices as an ongoing priority for research and evaluation. Research should aim to generate findings that can be used to help early childhood education programs identify and implement the highest-quality teaching practices that improve the learning and well-being of children, including dual language learners, children with developmental delays or disabilities, and children who have experienced trauma.

Intensive Family Engagement

A wealth of scientific findings show that parent-child relationships and parent engagement in learning help to lay the foundation for the lifelong success of young children and are powerful predictors of a child's educational outcomes. The early childhood field has long understood this critical importance, and in recent years, the field has sharpened its focus. But there remains a research gap in several areas critical to achieving this vision, including a need for more nuanced understanding of parents' own development and the identification of more comprehensive and culturally appropriate measures of family engagement and family-school partnerships. The agenda calls for researchers to gather information from families and create opportunities for parent-driven innovation so that program improvements are guided by families' diverse expertise, strengths, needs and perspectives.

ADVANCING THE RESEARCH AGENDA

Ambitious in scope, this research agenda will require cross-disciplinary expertise and collaboration. The Educare Learning Network invites and encourages all stakeholders and partners from early education and allied fields—researchers, families, research-granting agencies, schools and other community organizations—to share their diverse expertise and to advance knowledge of these key areas of inquiry in early education settings nationwide. The agenda highlights the following partnership priorities:

Partnerships between researchers and practitioners

We call for strong partnerships between researchers and practitioners. Practitioner-generated research questions are richly informed by an understanding of the day-to-day aspects of early education programs and have clear applications for continuous improvement and innovation.

Partnerships between researchers and families

We ask researchers to partner with families, so that new research reflects parents' ideas about the conditions and practices that are fruitful to their children's success. In addition, research should be effectively communicated with families and they should be empowered to interpret and use data to improve learning opportunities in the home.

Partnerships with other early childhood programs and researchers to broadly implement and evaluate promising practices

We invite the field to join us in documenting and evaluating innovative practices in the four core areas of inquiry to build the evidence base for effective approaches across diverse settings and disseminate and scale quality practices.

Partnerships with K–12 researchers, policymakers and practitioners

We invite and encourage K–12 researchers and local and national policymakers, educators and administrators to partner with us in exploring the best ways to prepare young children for elementary and high school and sustain children's success in early learning over the long term.

Partnerships with policy researchers

We call for policy researchers to help build understanding of the systems, structures and policies at the local, state and national levels that are most effective at promoting and sustaining quality practices and ensuring child and family success.

The areas of inquiry put forth in this agenda offer the opportunity for researchers, community organizations, schools and families to work together to build knowledge about effective practices with proven potential to impact the lives of young children and their families—particularly those living in low-income communities. The Educare Learning Network is committed to delving into these areas of inquiry in coming years, and we invite others to join us in exploring questions about how to provide the highest quality early learning and life experiences for each and every child, from birth through age five.

Read the complete National Research Agenda for Early Education at educareschools.org.

Please direct all questions and comments regarding the research agenda to Tony Raden, senior vice president, research and policy initiatives at the Ounce of Prevention Fund at araden@ounceofprevention.org.

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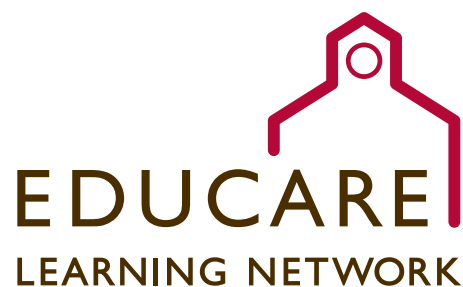
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