One of the more notable trends in state policy over the past decade has been the increased legislative activity and investment around early childhood education. In the Midwest, countless laws and programs (some new, some long-standing) are now in place, from “Preschool for All” in Illinois to “Gearing up in Kindergarten,” in North Dakota.

While the region’s various prekindergarten initiatives vary in scope and design, they all reflect a belief among policymakers that a positive early learning experience can lessen achievement gaps, reduce the need for special supports as children get older, and produce better results for individuals and their communities. But offering access to a good preschool is only one piece of a very complex policy puzzle. To improve child well-being and long-term outcomes, states are looking to broaden their approach, in part by trying to reach more young people even earlier in life.

“What you begin to realize when you’re working with children who have already had three or four years of development is the importance of supporting early brain development — prenatal through age 3,” notes Virginia Knox, director of family well-being and children’s development for the MDRC, a nonpartisan education and social policy research organization.

That realization, for example, has led to a new campaign in Indiana to help expectant mothers make healthier lifestyle choices (for themselves and their babies) in order to reduce infant mortality and preterm birth rates.

In Wisconsin and Nebraska, a greater emphasis is being placed on measuring and rewarding quality child care, while Minnesota has been a longtime leader in offering family education programs (through local school districts), including state-funded home visits to nurture positive parent-child interactions.

“Challenging home environments can lead to toxic effects on children’s early development,” Knox says. “When you know that, the more you see the importance of supporting the environment where the child is being raised. The goal is to mitigate what otherwise might be [home] environments that are so challenging that they really have long-term effects on children’s development.” Addressing these myriad policy challenges (and opportunities) is now a focus of the Midwestern Legislative Conference, the nonpartisan group of all legislators from 11 states and four Canadian affiliate provinces. (CSG Midwest provides staff support to the MLC.) Wisconsin Rep. Joan Ballweg is chair of the MLC, and for her chair’s initiative, she has chosen to raise awareness about state programs that improve child well-being and lead to better long-term outcomes.

“Early investment translates to reduced costs and more productive citizens,” Ballweg says. (See below for the full interview about her chair’s initiative.)
Breaking harmful cycles

One goal of these early interventions is to reduce the prevalence of “adverse childhood experiences,” or ACEs: traumatic events such as child abuse or neglect that have negative, lasting effects on a person’s well-being and behavior. A state invests in a home-visiting program for at-risk families, for example, with the idea that cases of child maltreatment can be prevented. Or it ensures access to behavioral and mental health care for parents, because this can improve a child’s home environment. But addressing (and not just preventing) these ACEs should also be a part of state strategies, Ballweg says. She notes that in Wisconsin, there has been a concerted effort among state leaders to promote trauma-informed care, which employs scientific research to help reverse the negative consequences of ACEs.

In Ohio, meanwhile, a three-year-old Strong Families, Safe Communities program is spreading evidence-based practices centered on trauma-informed care, while also targeting improved treatment and care coordination for young people in crisis or suffering from a mental illness. The name of Ohio’s program underscores the intent of many of these new state programs and laws on child well-being: fostering “strong families” as the way to help young people thrive. “If you start thinking of it as a two-generation problem,” Knox says, “then some policies are going to be aimed at parents and their well-being, so that the whole family can have either economic security or a strong home environment for children.” That “two-generation strategy” can take the form of income, housing or employment supports so that children grow up with more economic security, she adds, or it can mean providing parents with the trauma-informed care they need to cope with their own adverse childhood experiences.

Role of foster care in child well-being

Yet some children inevitably come to rely on a state’s child welfare system. In 2014, for example, more than 200,000 young people entered the nation’s foster care system — from 999 in North Dakota to 9,924 in Ohio. (That same year, more than 400,000 children were in the nation’s foster care system.) “It is everything to these kids,” Michigan Rep. Jim Runestad, a longtime foster care parent, says about the system. “You listen to them talk, and even though they address concerns about this or that, you’ll also hear some of them — a significant portion of them — say the foster care system saved their lives.” He has used his platform as a legislator to raise awareness about the system’s importance, along with some of its shortcomings.

At “KidSpeak” events hosted by Runestad, children in foster care have told their stories — of being separated from their siblings, for example, or of being moved from school to school or home to home multiple times in a single year. “Listen for 20 minutes to their stories,” he says, “and it will change your outlook.” The personal stories of children, in fact, helped lead to the introduction of legislation this year in Michigan that would create a Foster Care Children’s Bill of Rights. At committee meetings a few years ago to create a Foster Parents Bill of Rights, legislators heard from the children as well, Rep. Marcia Hovey-Wright recalls. It became clear then, she adds, that young people’s rights should be codified as well. “I view it as common-sense things that all kids should have a right to,” Hovey-Wright says.

Passed by the Michigan House earlier this year, the legislation (HB 4976-4978) would ensure access to behavioral health services, a plan to be placed in a permanent home and help with the transition to independent living. It also requires the state to place children with close relatives and friends and to keep siblings together whenever possible. “If we as a state are going to take them out of the home, then we better provide the services they need,” Hovey-Wright says. Hovey-Wright, a Democrat, and Runestad, a Republican, are co-sponsors of the legislative package — just one indication that there is plenty of room for bipartisan agreement on state policies to improve child well-being.

Click here to learn more about the different policies being pursued by states in the Midwest »

Click here for an interview with Wisconsin Rep. Joan Ballweg about her Midwestern Legislative Conference Chair’s Initiative »
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