



A *wild patience*  
HAS TAKEN US THIS FAR

THE STORY OF  
Alliance *for* Early Success  
10 Years +





## HOW FAR?

In 2005, the Alliance invested \$1.5 million in 10 grantees.

In 2015, the Alliance:

- + Invested a range of resources in 30 states, with intensive efforts in 17.
- + Supported 28 national technical assistance organizations to enhance state-level advocacy and policy work.
- + Made grants totaling over \$6.9 million, and leveraged an additional \$6.7 million from local, state and national funders.
- + Awarded over \$234,000 for Rapid Response.

### *“A wild patience*

has taken me this far.” In a poem by this title, Adrienne Rich declares the value, over time, of both ferocity and forbearance.

As the Alliance for Early Success begins its second decade, “a wild patience” conveys a tension that lies at the heart of the work. It captures a dedication to steady, incremental change and strategic investment, even as headlines

*Advocacy and policy work must be bold... and meticulous.*

call attention to the immediacy of young children’s needs and political rhetoric places us in a metaphorical race. It speaks to the need for bold action informed by painstaking research, deliberation, and planning.

It was in the spirit of wild patience that the Alliance for Early Success was established in 2005 to connect and catalyze state, national, and funding partners. From the start, the Alliance was characterized both by passionate commitment and unabashed workishness, rooted in the conviction that putting vulnerable young children on the path to success requires unstinting, unglamorous efforts—year by year, state by state—to enact and follow through on policies that lift up health, family, and learning outcomes.

The Alliance began with three core beliefs that have only grown stronger over time. First, the early years matter. All young children deserve the best possible start in life. Vulnerable children stand to gain the most from high-quality initiatives that focus on early development and learning. When they thrive, the possibility of their later success—and of ours as a nation—rises dramatically.

Second, policy matters. It is often hard to see the fine fibers that connect dry policy debates with the prospects of a tiny newborn in a Lansing neonatal intensive care unit, or with the future earnings of a struggling reader in a Philadelphia elementary school. For the Alliance and its partners, those connections are very real.

And third, partnership matters. The policies that hold promise for improving young children’s prospects can be designed and realized only with focused, coordinated efforts by many advocates and policy innovators working across

the nation. Their efforts must be bold and meticulous, combining a sense of higher purpose with a willingness to dive into research and gritty legislative minutiae.

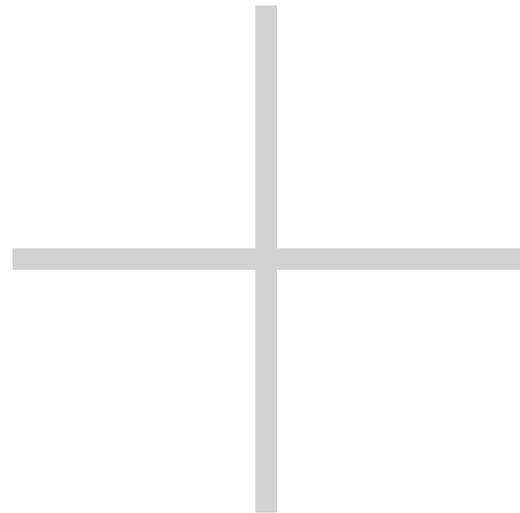
To realize their power and creativity, early childhood advocates and policy planners need access to a solid research base, opportunities to share ideas with their counterparts in other states, and timely, targeted technical assistance. To sustain their efforts, they need skilled leadership and a strategic blend of resources.

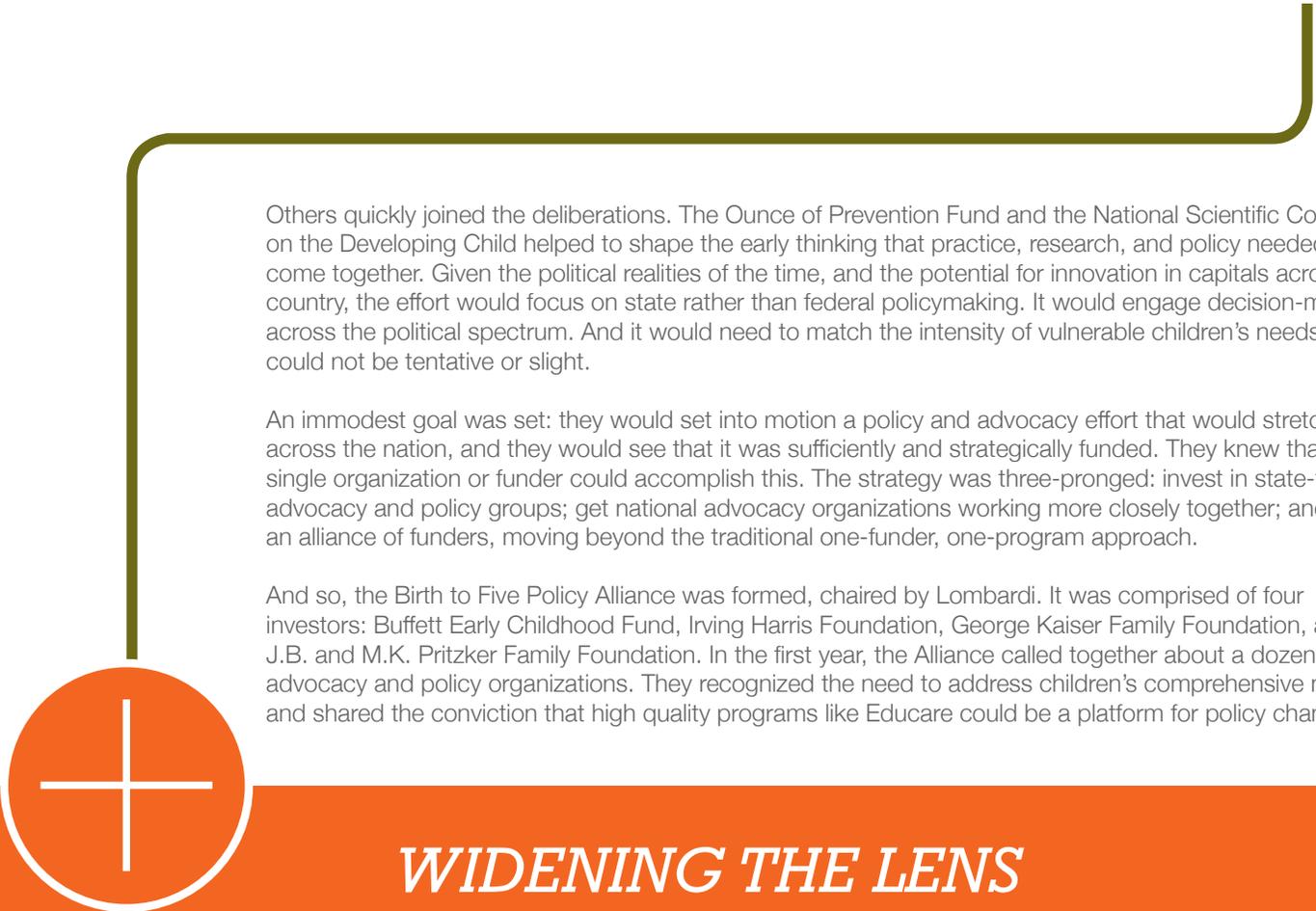
## *That is the work of the Alliance.*

Over a decade, the Alliance has grown into a dynamic, peer-learning network of powerhouse advocates and innovators, including both veteran players and newer champions, working inside and outside of government to drive change.

Surveying the field a decade ago, the Buffett Early Childhood Fund—a moving force behind Educare—recognized philanthropy’s vital role in the growing prekindergarten movement. But given emerging scientific evidence that crucial learning and development take place in the first years of life, they were convinced that age four is too late to begin investments. They were determined to do more for vulnerable infants, toddlers and preschoolers, and they looked to early childhood experts for advice on how to make the most strategic investments.

Before there was an Alliance, there was a call to action, and it resounded in a conversation that took place on Election Day, 2004. A policy expert and articulate early childhood advocate, Joan Lombardi met with the Buffett Early Childhood Fund. As they waited for the results of the election, they talked about the importance of “building on the science of early childhood” and moving from “evidence into action.” They envisioned an effort that would change Americans’ perceptions about when learning begins: at birth, not at the schoolhouse door. There and then, on that November afternoon, the Buffett Early Childhood Fund resolved to direct its efforts to meeting the challenge—launching a major, non-governmental effort to shift the odds for young at-risk children.





Others quickly joined the deliberations. The Ounce of Prevention Fund and the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child helped to shape the early thinking that practice, research, and policy needed to come together. Given the political realities of the time, and the potential for innovation in capitals across the country, the effort would focus on state rather than federal policymaking. It would engage decision-makers across the political spectrum. And it would need to match the intensity of vulnerable children's needs. It could not be tentative or slight.

An immodest goal was set: they would set into motion a policy and advocacy effort that would stretch across the nation, and they would see that it was sufficiently and strategically funded. They knew that no single organization or funder could accomplish this. The strategy was three-pronged: invest in state-facing advocacy and policy groups; get national advocacy organizations working more closely together; and forge an alliance of funders, moving beyond the traditional one-funder, one-program approach.

And so, the Birth to Five Policy Alliance was formed, chaired by Lombardi. It was comprised of four investors: Buffett Early Childhood Fund, Irving Harris Foundation, George Kaiser Family Foundation, and the J.B. and M.K. Pritzker Family Foundation. In the first year, the Alliance called together about a dozen national advocacy and policy organizations. They recognized the need to address children's comprehensive needs and shared the conviction that high quality programs like Educare could be a platform for policy change.

## *WIDENING THE LENS TO BIRTH THROUGH AGE EIGHT*

From the start, the Alliance proceeded from the conviction that the early years make a decisive difference in the lives of vulnerable children. And so, the founders created the Birth to Five Policy Alliance. In 2012, they widened the focus to encompass birth through age eight.

Two kinds of emerging evidence pushed this thinking. First, early studies of preschool showed that program effects can fade, absent a continuum of high-quality services to maintain gains in the primary grades. Second, researchers were confirming prior studies showing that the odds of high school graduation (and other positive life outcomes) can be predicted based on third graders' achievement and behavioral traits. To be sure, development continues throughout life; efforts to support learning and healthy development cannot stop at age eight either. But primary-grade experiences strongly affect children's trajectories.

Based on developmental science and emerging evidence, the Alliance expanded its reach and became the Alliance for Early Success.

In 2008, Lisa Klein, a well respected child development expert with extensive philanthropic background, became the first Executive Director and established the Alliance as a non-profit organization. She was fortunate to have a strong team in place from the very beginning, including Helene Stebbins and Steffanie Clothier, who both brought deep experience in early childhood research and policy.

At this point, the Alliance team recognized the importance of addressing the birth-through-eight continuum, and of ensuring that gains made in early learning programs were sustained into the elementary years. The Birth to Five Policy Alliance became the Alliance for Early Success.

## *The Alliance's approach proved to be a game-changer.*

The notion of partnership was not new, of course. Early childhood advocates and funders had gotten together for years to talk strategy and work toward complementary initiatives. But this was virtually unprecedented: foundations committing dollars to make joint grants, and in the process giving up their day-to-day decision-making roles and the opportunity to brand their efforts as individual foundations; non-profits working together on common grants, and in the process giving up exclusive claims on impact.

Today, the Alliance comprises eleven investors and continues to grow. Joining the original four are the David and Lucille Packard Foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Heising-Simons Foundation, Richard Goldman Family Foundation, and an anonymous donor.

Alliance investors have the commitment and resources needed to deepen the work over time. As one Alliance investor has observed, when there is change in leadership, a foundation will generally swing the spotlight to new priorities. That is to be expected—but it makes the slow, incremental work of policy change hard to sustain. An *alliance* of investors, in contrast, provides the stability needed to take the long view, and the agility required to respond rapidly to an unexpected opportunity or ward off a threat to vital policies, programs, or funding. An *alliance* of investors has the wherewithal to work in many states, on many fronts, at the same time.

Still, no group—not even an alliance of multiple investors—can do it all. The world of policy is all about choices and tradeoffs. For the Alliance, the question is: Which efforts can make the greatest difference for young children, especially those whose trajectories are uncertain?

With a *wild* patience, mindful of the daily realities of those children, Alliance change-makers act decisively on their behalf and fervently call upon others to help move the agenda. And with a *wild patience*, they pursue day by day those policy wins that can most powerfully lift vulnerable children's life chances.



## 2005 TRENDLINES

Compared with 2001:

- + 11% more children were living in poverty.
- + 6% more children were living in households where there was no employed parent.
- + 7% more babies were born at low birth weights.

### *In 2005, barriers to equity and quality were steep.*

Patience seemed like a luxury advocates could not afford. In the late nineties, welfare reform had sharply increased maternal employment—and the demand for non-parental child care. The number of children needing child care rose quickly. Slots in centers and family child care homes, as well as subsidy funding, were on the rise. But while funding increased, it did not keep up with the demand, and quality was a constant concern.

To be sure, there had been key victories, particularly in the realm of children's health insurance, but in the new century's first years, progress stalled. Child well-being statistics for the nation as a whole, and for individual states, showed little progress in most areas, and disheartening declines in some.

At the same time, the case for investment in early childhood development and learning, and for increased attention to the most vulnerable children and families, was growing more robust, thanks to a convergence of powerful evidence from several fields (including education, neuroscience, economics, developmental psychology, cognitive science, and medicine).

There was a catch. All of the evidence suggested that investments in the early years would pay off only if the resulting services and supports were of sufficiently high quality and of sufficient duration. But in the real world of early childhood programs and services, quality varied markedly. In many states, policymakers had ample feedback about what was wrong, but needed help figuring out how to make it right. Early childhood advocacy and policy groups spread across the states were eager for assistance. They wanted to understand all of their policy options and the underlying evidence. Some were eager to see model legislation and to understand how policy wins had been achieved in other states. Others needed help marshaling evidence to support a particular policy. Most wanted to fortify their communications strategies, and to line up influential spokespersons who could help them make their case to decision-makers and the wider public.

This was the big picture in early childhood policy and advocacy in 2005. And against the backdrop of that canvas, millions of young children—in

hospital nurseries, homes, parks, shelters, community centers, and preschool classrooms across the nation—were embarking on journeys filled with promise and peril.

## *The Alliance got to work*

in 2005, creating a break-the-mold model of joint investment—an alliance of investors with sufficient resources, experience, and clout to drive a vigorous, coordinated state-by-state effort.

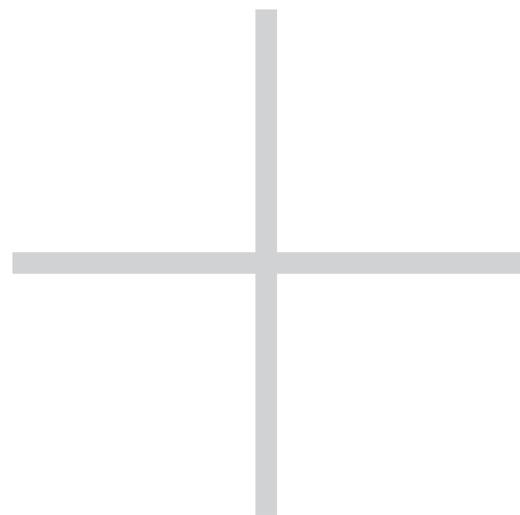
*In the realm of advocacy and policy, the Alliance has pursued not just the state of the art, but also the art of the state.*

In the realm of advocacy and policy, the Alliance has pursued not just the state of the art, but also the art of the state. This strategy reflected an ardent realism. Major policy initiatives in the nineties had, through large block grants, placed children’s care and development firmly in the hands of the states. This was not about to change quickly or easily. Each state had in place a unique, complex set of laws,

regulations, funding mechanisms, and governance arrangements that shaped services and supports for young children and their families, and each state had a unique set of competing claims on public attention and finance. State-level advocates were taking on more visible, prominent roles.

The strategy also reflected the Alliance’s resolve to leverage the unique strengths of state-based groups: dense networks; an insider’s feel for local conditions; experience working across party lines; and strong instincts about what is possible in a particular state context and what it will take to get there.

From the start, the Alliance set its sights on state policies that could change the calculus for children through legislative, regulatory, or budgetary actions. Once policies or appropriations move toward passage, they can begin to seem inevitable. But in reality, these achievements happen only with myriad behind-the-scenes encounters known unpoetically as “technical assistance” — the transactions that give traditional advocacy organizations,



business groups, and civic organizations the information, tools, relationships, and resources they need to succeed in the increasingly specialized, technical, networked world of policy. Today's organizations need to acquire systems and technical capacities unimagined by yesterday's policy wonks.

Expertise and resources from national organizations therefore became a crucial variable in the Alliance equation. The Alliance has invested in the most respected national content experts, as well as research, data, and communication groups to inform state-level policy analysis and development.

The Alliance has also recognized the essential relationship that exists between state and federal policy. A close partnership with the First Five Years Fund means state partners receive information about federal opportunities, and provide input so state experiences inform federal advocacy and policies.

## *The heavy lifting has been done by the partners themselves.*

Their efforts in three strategic areas have resulted in long strides for vulnerable young children and their families.



## *EARLY LEARNING, HEALTH & FAMILY SUPPORT*

The Alliance has deep roots in early learning, helping states to expand access to high quality child care and preschool; influence eligibility standards; or initiate quality improvement strategies.

Over the decade, the focus on family support and health has sharpened. The Alliance leadership team was mindful that parents have the most influence over children's development and that young children spend more time at home than in early learning programs. They need safe conditions, responsive care, and appropriate stimulation throughout the day, wherever they are. Children born to economically disadvantaged parents are less likely to get good health care and more likely to be born at low birth weights and to be at risk for a range of negative outcomes later in life.

Two decades of work had shown the effectiveness of comprehensive strategies that address early learning, health, and family support. Unfortunately, most policies and funding streams still operate in silos. The Alliance is tackling this head on by highlighting policies that cut across these areas, and by investing in developmental screening, home visiting, mental health, and other crucial supports.

**ADVOCACY:** Alliance partners have refined advocacy strategies over the decade: making innovative use of research and data, as well as new interactive data-tracking tools; working toward unified, coordinated messaging; focusing on building bi-partisan support among policymakers; and engaging new, sometimes unexpected champions who can influence public opinion about the wisdom of early childhood investments. These partners have become adept at using social media both to build awareness of young children's needs and to promote specific policies.

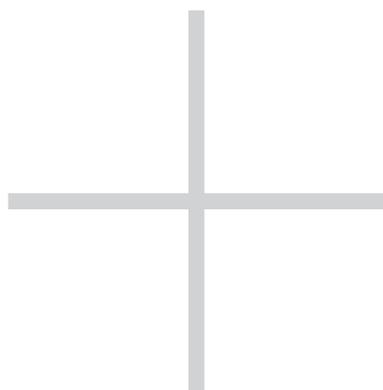
**POLICYMAKER LEADERSHIP:** Our partners have not only monitored and strengthened existing policy directions; they have also served as a resource for policymakers. By investing in associations that serve elected and appointed officials, the Alliance has taken a proactive stance, focusing not just on policy, but also on policy *leadership*. Our partners have supported governors' early learning summits, an early learning fellows network of legislators and their staffs, and a joint policy statement put out by the chief state school officers on the importance of building a strong foundation for learning in the early years.

*The Alliance has taken a proactive stance, focusing not just on policy, but also on policy leadership.*

**KNOWLEDGE:** From the start, the question "what works" drove the Alliance. Which policies and practices have the best chance of improving outcomes for young children? When the Alliance was founded, two kinds of evidence were showing particularly strong potential for advancing the early childhood agenda, but each required strategic investment. First, exciting brain research and insights from developmental scientists were helping policymakers pinpoint opportunities to foster resilience and address risks in the early years, while also building a powerful case for public investment. But too often, key points were lost in translation, or led to simplistic responses. Alliance partners responded by framing scientific insights in ways that reach policymakers and the public and benefit children. Second, advocates needed help putting big data to work for small children. Advances in technology were quickly revolutionizing data collection and analysis techniques, opening up new possibilities for tracking national and state-level data across multiple indicators of child well being. In 2005, data systems were relatively primitive, and there were significant gaps in some key areas. Today, our partners include many of the field's most respected, trusted sources for research, policy analysis, and innovative data-tracking.

## *The Alliance developed a State Policy Framework.*

The Alliance's Birth Through Eight State Policy Framework reflects input from more than 150 experts, and guides all Alliance efforts and partnerships. Drawing on research and best practices, the Framework offers an extensive menu of best-bet policy options, recognizing that in different states, seemingly similar challenges may call for different solutions. Its wide-ranging policy options are updated periodically to reflect emerging evidence as well as demographic, social, and economic trends, such as the changing face of America and the economic volatility that affects millions of families with young children.



## FIVE PRINCIPLES

1. Start early.
2. Focus on vulnerable populations.
3. Inform policy choices with evidence and best practices.
4. Implement policy with smart funding.
5. Ensure accountability for results and continuous improvement.

The Framework meshes early learning priorities with related challenges in health and family support. It includes cross-cutting policy choices to reflect the reality that families' complicated, sprawling lives do not fit neatly into categories. Young children learn and grow wherever they are—on the changing table, at work with Dad on a “snow day,” in the pediatrician’s office, in the school’s block corner. Their ability to thrive often hinges on investments that cut across the key areas that influence development: family, health, and learning.

The Framework sets out five key principles that drive the policy choices:

**The best outcomes result from starting early.** The myriad forces that can alter individual trajectories do not wait for the first, nervous day of preschool to exert their influence, nor do they fade as cameras capture first-graders’ charming, toothless grins. Public policy, and both private and public dollars, play a role in shaping early development and learning from the very start and continue to have importance well into the elementary years.

**Vulnerable populations have the most to gain from strategic investments in the early years.** From the start, the

Alliance found data to be a powerful antidote to denial. Research leaves no doubt that across a range of critical measures of development and learning, children who experience hardship and persistent stress face uphill odds. The impact of adverse childhood events can be significant and long-lasting. Family circumstances, such as immigration, or parental unemployment, or insecure housing, can also slow progress on the path to success. The kind of minor mishap that is an inconvenience for more advantaged families—say, a lost bus pass or inhaler—can have improbably far-reaching consequences for vulnerable families. For all of these reasons, the Alliance developed an approach that focuses most intensively on vulnerable children, valuing and building on the strengths of their families and communities.

*Data — a powerful  
antidote to denial.*

**Evidence and best practices inform the policy choices.** Many considerations drive policy choices, but key among them must be the strength of the underlying evidence. Providing access to the best available

research from several disciplines—while supporting its responsible, strategic use—is therefore key to the work of the Alliance.

**Implementing the policy choices requires smart investments.** From the start, Alliance investors had a keen understanding that the right level and mix of funding are crucial to the success of any serious change effort, and that miscalculations can have drastic consequences for policies and programs—and for children. This led to grant-making and technical assistance that help advocates and policymakers immerse themselves in the intricacies of analyzing state budgets and appropriations, mixing diverse funding streams, designing public-private partnerships, and ensuring fiscal accountability. And it fostered intensive efforts to use grant dollars to leverage funds from local, state, and national funders.

**Passing good policies is not enough.** The ultimate goal is to improve outcomes for young children and their families, and that happens when policy and funding come together in the effective implementation of programs and services. Monitoring progress, measuring results, and adopting a philosophy of continuous improvement help ensure that good policies lead to good outcomes. Continuous improvement means working smarter: sharing challenges and solutions; learning from other Alliance partners; analyzing miscalculations and making course corrections; and incorporating new or improved tools and emerging research into every effort.

## *How far*

has a wild patience taken us? What has been accomplished for young children and their families? The Alliance has catalyzed and supported the work of a growing roster of nimble, powerful partners. In 2014 the Alliance helped states win close to \$1 billion in new funds directed to services and supports for vulnerable young children. Twenty of the 24 states with Alliance support registered policy wins across the Framework's priority areas, and 21 increased funding for vulnerable children birth through age eight.

All of this work is potentiated by an Alliance leadership team that provides steady support to the network of state, national, and funding partners, managing investments, curating the best organizations to bolster efforts in a particular state or policy sphere, and brokering rapid response to emerging opportunities or challenges.

Through coordinated grant-making, the Alliance works to resolve some of the fragmentation in the field, helping national and state organizations build relationships so that they can share expertise, experience, and resources. Annual meetings bring partners together to network, learn from each other, delve into new research, and take advantage of technical expertise.



## “FURTHER” MEANS...

...closer to these outcomes:

1. Children thrive in families and communities that support their healthy development.
2. Children are born healthy, stay healthy, and are surrounded by healthy adults.
3. Families help their children explore, learn, and grow in safe and nurturing places.
4. Children arrive at Kindergarten with the skills and abilities to meet developmental milestones, read on grade level, and reach achievement goals at every grade level moving forward.

Over time, the wisdom of some early decisions has been confirmed: the importance of *identifying a lead partner* in states where the Alliance is doing intensive work; *meeting states where they are* in terms of their advocacy capacity and policy opportunities; and *helping advocacy organizations tap the expertise of national partners*.

Over the years, advocacy on behalf of vulnerable young children and their families has been enhanced or sustained. Alliance investments have contributed to new policies and increased funds to support children along the birth-through-eight continuum. Policy victories have spanned the range of outcomes in the Policy Framework, including health and mental health, parent engagement and support, access to high quality child care and preschool programs, and well planned transitions between early learning and early elementary classrooms.

## *Now, a wild patience will take us further.*

Further means closer to the results we want for our nation's young children, especially those who are most vulnerable.

What will it take to achieve these results?

The formula is easy to spell out, but hard to realize: Good policy. Solid implementation.

Strong partnerships. Articulate champions.

Smart, aligned public and private investments so proven programs can go to scale. Emerging leaders to carry forward the work.

*We are better and stronger together.*

In the decade to come, the Alliance and our partners will dedicate ourselves to building on the Framework and realizing its promise. Some challenges will emerge; others are already clear:

**Seize new opportunities for cross-cutting work.** To work change at the magnitude needed to improve outcomes for millions of young children, advocates and policy innovators will be crafting solutions that reflect all of the factors that influence their life chances. Single, stand-alone programs

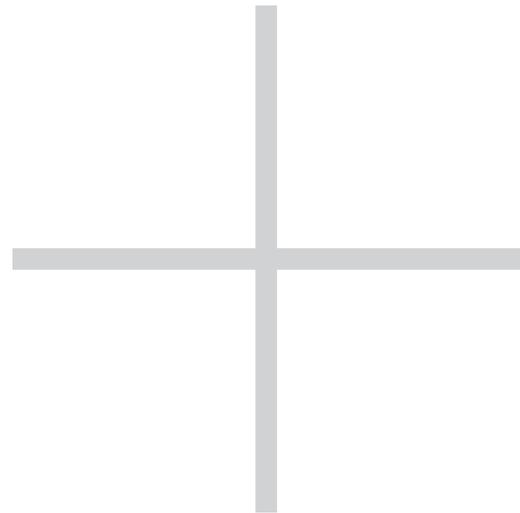
are likely to give way to integrated bundles of high quality services that working parents with young children can more easily access and afford.

**Sharpen and extend advocacy efforts.** Advocacy efforts will increasingly shift from the question, *Why invest in early childhood?* to the challenge: *What can be done to produce larger impacts, especially for children facing adversity?* To be sure, making the case for public support for effective early childhood practices remains a huge challenge. Best practices are only “best” today. Advocacy can and must be framed in ways that resonate across the political spectrum, engaging new and different types of champions. As breakthrough strategies emerge, advocates and policymakers will be ready to respond and to extend their reach.

**Ensure the continuity of efforts across the birth-through-eight span.** For policymakers, this presents a set of challenges that computer experts call “defrag” – creating coherence from myriad, messy fragments. In states across the nation, as in the federal government, different agencies are responsible for babies and toddlers, preschoolers, and elementary-grade children. Parents and policymakers alike confront a patchwork of programs, eligibility requirements, regulations, and funding mechanisms for children of different ages. For families, this can mean tricky transitions from one setting to another. Over the next decade, we expect that advocates and policymakers will be emphasizing birth-through-eight approaches, working toward greater continuity and smoother transitions. Movement toward a new model of primary education may also figure in this effort.

## *Whatever the challenge...*

The Alliance for Early Success is committed to learning and growing, and to continuing to work on behalf of young children. Wildly. Patiently. With dedication to working with our partners to improve vulnerable young children’s outcomes and odds of success. With the unshakable belief that we are better and stronger together.



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#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT:

The Alliance is deeply appreciative of the time, expertise, and passion that Dr. Rima Shore put into writing this paper. Shore is the Adelaide Weismann Endowed Chair in Educational Leadership at Bank Street College, and one of the most respected experts in early childhood research and policy. She has written extensively on the topic, from the path-breaking *Rethinking the Brain: New Insights into Early Development*, to *The Power of Pow Wham! Digital Media, Children, and the Future of Our Nation*.

For an electronic version of this paper, along with references, visit [www.earlysuccess.org](http://www.earlysuccess.org).



Alliance for  
Early Success

*Advancing State Policies  
for Young Children*

NOVEMBER 2015