Nearly all respected research points to the considerable positive effects that high-quality early education can have on young learners. But early education is so much more than a potential boost to student academic gains down the line – it’s a form of child care, and a support system for young parents staking out their careers with little learners in tow. It’s also a bedlam of research disputes: Does early education matter before age 3? What are the gains attributed to pre-K cognitive or behavioral in form? Should state-funded programs be provided to all families or just those with low incomes? With 30 states increasing their pre-K spending in the 2013-2014 fiscal year and a president and Senate deeming publicly financed early education a priority, the time is ripe to explore your state’s patchwork of early education programs. The following EWA Story Lab is meant to get you started with story ideas your editors and readers will find indispensable. It’s a blueprint for compelling narratives, eye-opening discoveries and evergreen data sets that can serve as a reference point for thousands of parents with young children. This Story Lab is developed with input from Jackie Mader of The Hechinger Report and Lillian Mongeau of EdSource Today – two of the few education journalists who regularly cover early education. EWA Program Assistant Mikhail Zinshteyn wrote the Story Lab.

New to Early Ed? Let State Data Tell a Story

How many students are served by preschool in your state or county? Of those, how many are eligible based on family income level and how many of those eligible through means-tested programs actually enroll in early education programs? Where are the rest of those kids while their parents are at work? Given the average cost of private preschool, are such students really in private care? Some states rely heavily on philanthropies to run early education centers. How transparent are those organizations and will kids suffer if those nonprofits ever pared their financial commitments? Even if your state doesn’t keep data sets on early education outlays, various federal and nonprofit agencies keep track of state enrollment and funding levels. Those include:

- National Center on Educational Statistics’ **The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS)** program
- Annie E. Casey **Kids Count data center**, which tracks early education program spending, enrollment and licensures
- National Institute for Early Education Research’s annual **The State Preschool Yearbook**
- **The Early Childhood Data Collaborative**, which issues qualitative assessments about state early education programs
- The National Association for the Education of Young Children, an advocacy group, releases annual **reports and recommendations** on safety, licensure, accreditation and pedagogy
- Education Commission on the States tracks education-related state legislation at all levels, including early education, as evidenced in this report on **FY 2013-2014 state funding commitments**

You’ve Done Your Early-Ed Data Crunching. Why Not Look at Quality?

What are the state’s quality requirements and does your state actually have a quality assurance program to monitor early education providers? Evidence suggests low-quality programs don’t help students, and gross negligence has led to children’s injury and death. Is your state making sure it’s getting results for its investments? Nearly all the research on early education prefaces any benefit to pre-K by noting the quality of the provider matters most. At least one state – Mississippi – is tracking whether low-income parents are using...
state early education subsidies by submitting them to finger scans when they drop off their kids at child care facilities.

**Who's Teaching the Tots?**

Recent reports show pre-K teachers earn about a third as much as K-12 teachers. They also require far less training. Many Head Start instructors are paid so little that they qualify for social services because their families live below the poverty line. In one state, a catfish Skinner earns more than an early education instructor. Give your readers similar comparisons.

**You’ve Gone Macro, Now Go Micro: How to Help Parents Choose Good Early-Ed Providers**

What do parents (and reporters) need to look for when touring a preschool to know whether it is high quality? Ways to find out: Call a local community college or university that trains early education instructors and receive recommendations through the education institution. Get to know an early education professor or teacher of early-ed instructors and have him or her point out what’s good and bad at early education providers you select. Take photos! Also, speak to local early elementary school teachers and see if they can spot the children who’ve attended any early education program, or for that matter, a good one. One journalist interviewed for this guide recounted a kindergarten teacher who could spot the students who attended pre-K by whether they knew how to hold a pencil or stand in line.

**The Sequester Isn’t Gone Yet**

Congress recently passed a set of reprieves from sequestration, but the budget deal that reverses the mandatory cuts is good for two years and the new spending bill expires after September 2014. You’ve just written several stories on why early education matters to the entire community, and now Washington is bolstering its federal spending on early education after paring funding to crucial programs. Before the spending deal passed in January, some 55,000 Head Start positions were cut, which meant more economic insecurity for already low-paid instructors and desperation among working parents who had limited funds to find child care.

On the flipside education—and early education in particular—won big in the budget deal hammered out in Congress to roll back sequestration. Head Start received more than $8 billion in the spending bill—a $612 million increase above spending levels before sequestration took hold. The Child Care and Development Block Grant increased by $154 million to $2.4 billion. The competitive grants known as Race to the Top are streamlined, with money focusing on expanding pre-K and enrolling more low-income kids. Also, look out for a forthcoming U.S. Department of Education report defining high-quality pre-K—another detail in the spending agreement. So will areas that lost Head Start seats regain them with the new money? Are providers reluctant to commit to new slots after the instability of the recession years?

**Early Ed and Common Core: When Their Powers Combine…**

You can get a sweet weekender on what good math education for early learners looks like. Or, your weekender can explore whether the new Common Core State Standards are indirectly robbing kids of valuable play time, as some critics contend.
Math education is starting before kindergarten. Some research shows young human brains are hard-wired for quantitative inputs done right. However, some experts contend the math standards are too academic for younger learners. Many early education providers are using the High Five, Mathematize curriculum because it’s recommended by Head Start. Head Start also provides training on how to teach High Five. Meanwhile, postsecondary institutions that train early education instructors are using Cognitively Guided Instruction (CGI), a type of instructional tool that is meant to help future practitioners teach math to young kids. It’s purported to be aligned with Common Core for its emphasis on project-based learning. Few early education programs that teach future early-ed instructors provide math training, but when it does happen, it’s likely with CGI. So call your local universities and see who’s teaching CGI, or any preparatory math instructional tool. Then connect with a graduate who’s now teaching math at an early education provider and see how she (or he) does it. Bring an early education researcher, too.

Or you can also go in a different direction: Is the build-up for Common Core reducing time dedicated to unstructured play? Peter Gray argues lack of play in early education settings stunts students’ social skills and may result in heightened cases of anxiety and depression. Others contend that early math and reading instruction should be built around play and interaction, and that sedentary pre-K and kindergarten classrooms may indicate too much rote learning. Other scholars say the sequencing of learning provided by the Common Core standards is the best tool available for increasing how much students know at a young age. Meanwhile, some point out that the Common Core is not a pedagogical blueprint at any grade level, meaning any inference that early education should focus on drilling is unfounded.

The Education Writers Association is dedicated to improving the quality and quantity of education coverage to create a better-informed society. As the national professional organization of members of the media who specialize in education, EWA has worked for more than 65 years to help journalists get the story right. Today, EWA members benefit from its high-quality training, information, and customized support.