



## Early Childhood Education Matters

Research indicates that only about 51% of Idaho students are ready to learn when they begin kindergarten. Those who aren't ready struggle to recognize letters and numbers, write their name, and other foundational skills.

**This is a jarring statistic, until you consider these facts about education in Idaho:**

- School districts are not required to offer kindergarten
- Children are not required to attend kindergarten and can delay the start of school until age 7
- The state only funds half-day kindergarten programs

Children begin learning to read in kindergarten, but this shouldn't be the starting line for education.

Why? Early education programs are important because they help provide a base for lifelong learning, behavior, and health. The early years (birth to age 5) are when brains develop rapidly, and quality early education programs can help promote cognitive, emotional, and social growth. There is no other time in a person's life when the brain develops as rapidly as those first five years.

These programs not only help cognitive, emotional, and social growth, they help prepare children for kindergarten. Data shows that children who attend quality early education programs are more likely to graduate high school, attend college or trade school and achieve higher earnings.

"Early learning is a priority, and although it may sound cliché, quality early learning is a game changer," said Dr. N. Shalene French, the superintendent of the Caldwell School District.

Studies also show that higher academic learning/achievement equates to better health outcomes. This is why the Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation for Health (the Foundation) continues to invest in early education programs across the state. The Foundation has helped 24 districts launch or expand early education programs.

This is critical because many Idaho communities lack places and opportunities for children to learn at a young age, especially rural areas. The state only funds early education programs that are legally mandated for children identified with developmental delays, leaving many children and families without access to early education. Idaho is one of six states that doesn't invest in any pre-kindergarten or school readiness programs.

Data indicates that 64% of Idaho's 3- and 4-year-olds are not participating in early education, well above the national average of 54%. WalletHub, a company that analyzes states on a wide variety of topics, ranks Idaho 48th in the country for early education systems.

### WHAT DOES EARLY EDUCATION LOOK LIKE?

Traditional preschool is geared for children ages 4-5, typically the year before kindergarten. There are programs that serve children ages 6 months up to age 5.

No matter the ages served or the frequency of the program, quality early education programs have certain things in common, including developmentally appropriate curriculums, safe and stimulating learning environments, qualified educators, family engagement, and others.

It's no wonder why early education grants are among the most requested to the Foundation. Idaho schools and districts see the value that early education programs bring to children and their families and want to make it available in their communities.

### AN IDAHO CASE STUDY

The Foundation supported the Caldwell School District with a grant that enabled Lincoln Elementary School to begin offering Play 2 Learn, a play-based program for children (ages 6 months to 5 years) and their parents or guardians that meets weekly for 90 minutes a session.

# Quality Early Education Programs Prepare Children for School, Success



The program launched in September 2024 and has been well received by the community. The interest was so high that the school added a second day of the week to accommodate more families and children.

"The whole goal of Play 2 Learn is for the parent and child to come and play in a space that's designed for them to play and explore," said Kari Palmer, Early Learning Project Manager. "The play is focused on early learning, math, and literacy. Parents come in and read to their children, then have time to play for an hour."

The classroom at Lincoln Elementary is set up with different centers so families can choose their favorite activities. There's an area for blocks, science, art, and dramatic play. The room contains sensory options, including sand and water, plus a library.

"The most incredible thing about this program is the opportunity to play and use the different skills and toys that Kari brings to the table," said Amber Nagengast, who takes her almost 3-year-old son, Leo, to Play 2 Learn. "It's been a game-changer for both me and my son."

Leo wasn't speaking much, and his doctor recommended an early education program.

"He told us it would behoove us to try to put him in a place where speech would develop at a rapid pace," she said. "That's been the case. When he's around children, he feels motivated to talk."

And for Amber, it's been a way to meet other parents and build a community outside of the classroom.

That's also been a selling point for Magaly Carrillo, a stay-at-home mom who, along with her husband, bring their 3-year-old daughter Alessandra to Play 2 Learn.

"These are huge opportunities for us to get out of the house and to learn," she said. "It's given me an opportunity to meet and get to know more moms and dads, and that's awesome."

One benefit of Play 2 Learn is parents and children experience the program together. It helps families bond and makes learning a partnership.

"The moment I stepped into the classroom, I knew that this was the environment I needed my son to be in," said Heather Ordonez, whose son, John, is 18 months old and has a neurodevelopmental syndrome. "The more early intervention that I can give to him, the better he's going to be. An environment like this is exactly where he's going to thrive."

Superintendent French enjoys seeing parents and children engaged in learning.

"In the few short months Play 2 Learn has been in operation, the demand for additional Play 2 Learn opportunities requested by our parents testifies to our parents' desires to support their child(ren) as learners," she said.

## Early Education Grant Recipients from the Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation for Health

Avery SD ( <i>Shoshone County</i> )	Kootenai Jt. SD ( <i>Harrison</i> )
Basin SD ( <i>Idaho City</i> )	Madison SD
Bliss SD	Marsing SD
Bruneau-Grand View Jt. SD ( <i>Bruneau</i> )	Meadows Valley SD ( <i>New Meadows</i> )
Caldwell SD	Mullan SD
Castleford SD	Nezperce SD
Fruitland SD	Pocatello/Chubbuck SD
Genesee SD	Snake River SD ( <i>Bingham County</i> )
Glenns Ferry SD	Sugar-Salem SD ( <i>Sugar City</i> )
Gooding SD	Wendell SD
Homedale SD	West Side SD ( <i>Dayton</i> )
Horseshoe Bend SD	Wilder SD
Lewiston SD	