

## 2. Make sure all children start school on an equal footing

### WHAT and WHY?

Ensuring that all youth can reach their full potential means levelling the playing field before children start school. OECD-wide, children of immigrants are overrepresented in socio-economically disadvantaged families. Early intervention is therefore crucial, as children who enter school with a relative disadvantage often struggle to catch up throughout schooling.

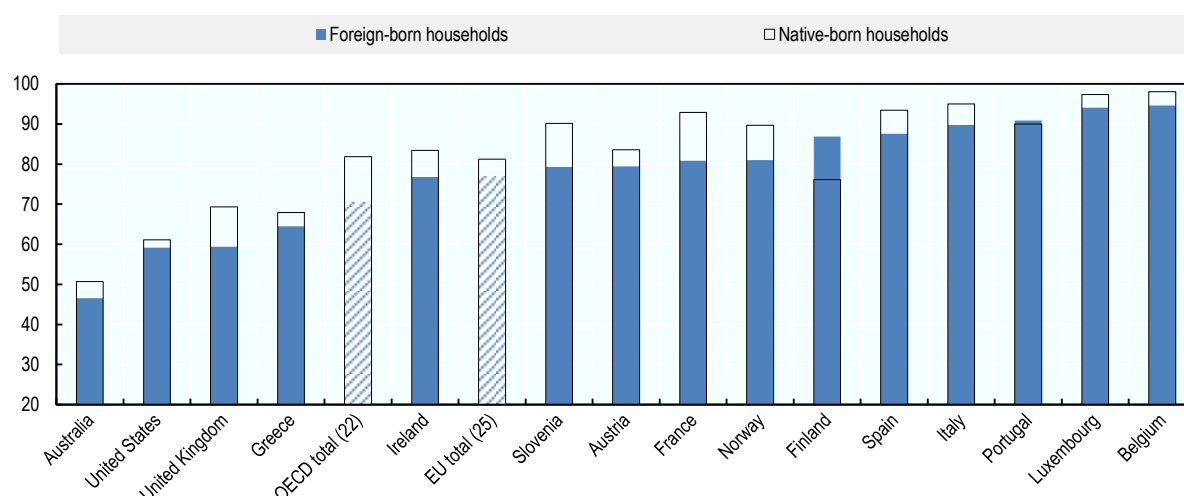
There is ample evidence that attending Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) benefits disadvantaged children, especially those with migrant parents (Balladares and Kankaraš, 2020<sup>[16]</sup>). It fuels children's social, linguistic and cognitive development and helps them overcome social disadvantage. Comparisons of the PISA reading scores of 15-year-old students with immigrant parents and similar socio-economic backgrounds show that those who attended ECEC consistently achieve higher scores. Overall, across the EU, the benefit of having attended preschool is 55 points at the age of 15 among the native-born children of immigrants – roughly equivalent to 1.5 school years. The corresponding benefit among native-born children of native-born is 23 points, about half a year of schooling (OECD/EU, 2018<sup>[11]</sup>). Most studies suggest that the critical age for ECEC participation to begin to show strong effects is around the age of three (OECD, 2017<sup>[3]</sup>).

In addition to mainstream ECEC, pre-school language screening and support can ensure that children of immigrants start school on equal footing with children of native-born. Many of the former speak a different or additional first language at home, contrasting most of their peers with native-born parents. Those who enter primary school without basic proficiency in the language of instruction, risk falling behind, since language mastery is a precondition for absorbing academic content and interacting with teachers and classmates. PISA data show that, at the age of 15, students with migrant parents who do not speak the language of instruction at home are approximately one year of schooling behind students with native-born parents (OECD, 2015<sup>[17]</sup>).

### WHO?

Attending Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is beneficial to all children. It yields particular benefits for children of immigrants from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and who do not master the language well (Balladares and Kankaraš, 2020<sup>[16]</sup>). Despite ample evidence of these advantages, children of immigrants are still underrepresented in ECEC in many OECD countries (Figure 2.1). However, the ECEC participation gap to children with native-born parents has decreased over the last decade (OECD/EU, 2018<sup>[11]</sup>). Likewise, early language screening and support, ideally before school, is useful to identify potential training needs of all children. Children who do not speak the language of instruction at home or lack advanced vocabulary and literacy skills might require additional support beyond mainstream ECEC.

**Figure 2.1. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) attendance rates, by place of birth of parents or guardians**



Source: OECD/EU (2018<sup>[11]</sup>).

## HOW?

Policies to ensure all children start school on an equal footing can be broadly clustered into two approaches:

- increasing the participation of children of immigrants in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)
- providing language screening and where necessary language support, at times including through the involvement of parents

The types of available ECEC services vary widely across the OECD. Important differences exist regarding the targeted age groups (0-3 years and 3-5 years), the management (public or private), the funding of services (free, subsidised or privately paid), the type of delivery (full-day versus part-day attendance) and the place of provision (in centres/schools or at home) (OECD, 2017<sup>[18]</sup>). To increase participation rates, three parameters are of interest:

- access: are ECEC services widely available and do immigrant children have access to them?
- affordability: is it possible to use ECEC services free of charge? If not, are there subsidies?
- awareness: are immigrant parents aware of the benefits associated with the use of ECEC and informed about available ECEC services in their area?

Most OECD countries expanded access to Early Childhood Education and Care since the early 2000s, and immigrant children have equally benefitted from this expansion (OECD, 2015<sup>[17]</sup>). In about two-thirds of OECD countries, children even have a legal entitlement to ECEC, at least from the age of three or four, generally regardless of their nationality or residence status. In the Nordic countries, Germany and Slovenia, children are legally entitled to a place in ECEC from the age of one or earlier. In Estonia and Latvia, children are entitled to a place starting at the age of 18 months, and Belgium guarantees access from 2.5 years of age. Another key parameter is the number of hours that children are legally entitled to. In about half of the countries the legal entitlement grants access to full-day services (40 hours per week or more), while in the

other half, children are only entitled to childcare services for half a day (15-25 hours per week). A final parameter to ensure children of immigrant can access ECEC is local availability, so that transportation is not an obstacle (Neidell and Waldfogel, 2009<sup>[19]</sup>).

### Box 2.1. Initiatives to include children from socio-economically disadvantaged families in ECEC programmes via home instruction

A prime and longstanding example of a home instruction programme for early childhood education is “Home Instruction for Parents of Pre-school Youngsters” (HIPPY). HIPPY, implemented in several OECD countries, teaches parents who face socio-economic disadvantage knowledge, confidence, and skills to nurture their children’s readiness for school. Australia, for example, has implemented the programme in 100 disadvantaged communities. Across the country, more than 2 000 families benefit from a free, two-year home-based parenting and early childhood enrichment programme. Home tutors are available to help disadvantaged families implement the programme at home.

In the United States, the ParentChild+ programme provides low-income families with the skills and materials they need to prepare their children for school and life success. The programme offers twice-weekly visits to families with children between the ages of 16 months and four years. It employs early literacy specialists from local communities, who speak the language of the families with whom they work. They connect them to other community resources, such as health and medical facilities and other education programmes. Upon completion, the staff assist families in enrolling their child in a centre-based, pre-school programme. While the programme does not directly target immigrant families, 60% of the beneficiaries are families who have a home language other than English.

To ensure that ECEC are *affordable* and costs are not a barrier, the majority of OECD countries (about two-thirds) provide ECEC programmes free of charge. However, mirroring legal entitlement to ECEC, free programmes are often available only for children aged three years and older, while care options for those below three years of age tend to be funded, at least partly, by parental contributions (OECD, 2015<sup>[17]</sup>). Latvia (from 18 months) and Belgium (from 2.5 years) offer full access to free ECEC services below age three. However, for children from disadvantaged families – among which immigrant parents are overrepresented – access to ECEC is free of charge from birth in some regions of Austria, in the French Community of Belgium, in Chile, Finland and Luxembourg. Slovenia grants conditional free access to children from 11 months, while France entitles disadvantaged children aged two years and older to access free ECEC services. Countries that do not grant free access usually subsidise costs for ECEC. Some countries have programmes in place to reach children from socio-economically disadvantaged families at home (Box 2.1).

If parents are not *aware* of ECEC services or hesitant to use them, children of immigrants might not benefit from such services, even where widely available and affordable. Various OECD countries have developed initiatives to reach out to immigrant parents, and to raise parents’ awareness of the value of early learning. Examples are home visit programmes, provision of learning resources and information to families, recruitment of culturally appropriate specialists, awareness campaigns, and trainings for pre-primary teachers and staff to work with culturally and linguistically diverse children (OECD, 2015<sup>[17]</sup>; OECD, 2014<sup>[20]</sup>).

Another way to ensure that children participate in ECEC is to make them compulsory. This is currently the case in 15 out of 36 OECD countries. Yet, in the vast majority of these countries, participation in ECEC is only compulsory from age five or later. For instance, Austria introduced a nation-wide free and compulsory half-day kindergarten year, one year before primary school. In France, Hungary, Israel and Mexico, ECEC is mandatory for all children from age three, and in Luxembourg compulsory ECEC starts at age four. In Switzerland ECEC up to the age 4 is not part of the compulsory education. However, at the age of four, all

children attend a compulsory pre-school ("Kindergarten / pré-primaire ou école enfantine") for a duration of two years prior to primary school.

From a policy perspective, providing early support through high-quality ECEC is less costly and more effective than intervening at a later stage (Heckman, 2006<sup>[21]</sup>; Woessmann and Schuetz, 2006<sup>[22]</sup>). In countries where ECEC places are limited, increasing the available offer is thus likely to yield high pay-offs (Drange and Telle, 2015<sup>[23]</sup>). Where ECEC services are well established, informing immigrant parents and encouraging them to make use of these is a logical next step.

An equally vital prerequisite to ensure that all children enter school on an equal footing is language screening and support. This generally takes one of the following two forms:

- systematic language screenings and stimulation at pre-school age, usually provided through ECEC institutions and public health institutions
- systematic language screenings upon enrolment in primary school, complemented by follow-up assessments and support

Early language screenings before school are usually provided through ECEC or public health institutions. Frequently, these screenings are mainstream policy among all children, regardless of whether or not they have migrant parents.

Denmark, for example, routinely screens the language skills of all children at age three. Children with gaps receive compulsory language stimulation. Children in the United Kingdom undergo a routine language assessment at age two to three. A follow-up assessment is performed at the end of the 'Early Years Foundation Stage', which is usually the academic year in which children turn five. The objective is to support a smooth transition into 'Key Stage 1', which covers first and second primary school years when children are 5 to 7 years of age, and to help teachers plan an effective, responsive and appropriate curriculum meeting the needs of all children. Luxembourg assesses children's language development at 30 months of age. If a screening reveals language difficulties, the country provides regular follow-ups and individual support until school age. In Norway, health clinics perform routine assessments of children's language abilities at age two and four, covering both children's first language and Norwegian. Clinics refer children with deficits to a follow-up assessment involving more extensive tests, diagnoses, and recommendations for tailored language support. In Germany, the age at which children are screened for language difficulties varies across states. The Land of Hesse, for example, performs routine language screenings in all ECEC institutions at the age of four. Where language difficulties are detected, children are referred to a follow-up screening at the public health department to consult with a paediatrician. Children with language difficulties receive one year of special support prior to entry into primary school in the form of a "preparation course" (Vorlaufkurs). Primary schools also assess language competency, usually upon entry. For children with deficits, ECEC institutions and primary schools jointly organise intensive, preparatory language courses in the year preceding primary school.

Austria carries out routine language screenings at the beginning and the end of each kindergarten year. ECEC staff observe children in every-day interactions at an ECEC centre and assess their language development against 15 criteria, including phonology, vocabulary, and ability to maintain a conversation. The results are used to develop tailored support offers, taking into account individual needs. In the Netherlands, young children from disadvantaged backgrounds aged two and a half to four years are entitled to participate in targeted early childhood education programmes (voeren vroegschoolse educaties) that provide ten hours of language development per week. For the remaining time, children attend regular early childhood education programmes. Findings from a national cohort study suggest that this approach bears high benefits in terms of better language mastery (Akgündüz and Heijnen, 2018<sup>[24]</sup>; Leseman et al., 2017<sup>[25]</sup>).

Once students reach the age of compulsory schooling, the responsibility for language development transfers from ECEC and health institutions to primary schools- Frequently, this is connected with a new

language assessment. In Denmark, for example, immigrant children take part in an individual Danish language assessment upon enrolling in primary school to identify any need for additional support. For this purpose, the Ministry of Education developed a tool for teachers to assess the linguistic development of bilingual children in the language of instruction. Schools in New Zealand identify and assess the learning needs of students with difficulties in the English language. Specially trained resource teachers administer bilingual assessments through the 'Bilingual Assessment Service' (BAS). Schools receive funding for 'English as a second language' programmes for up to five years for students with migrant parents below a benchmark score (OECD, 2018<sup>[2]</sup>). National assessment standards of English Language Learning Progression (ELLP) allow to identify stages of learning and monitor immigrant students' progress from grade 1 to grade 13.

**Table 2.1. Early language screening and stimulation**

|                | Early language screening before primary school |  |   | Early language stimulation for children in need before primary school  |   |
|----------------|--|--|---|--|---|
|                | Yes/No   | If yes age at ...                                  |   | Yes/No   | If yes, average number of hours per week                  |
|                |  | 1st screening                                      | 2nd screening   |  |   |
| Australia      | No   | /  | /   | No (but pre-school language training in foreign languages through the 'Early Learning Languages Australia (ELLA) Programme') | /   |
| Austria        | Yes  | 3-6 years  | 1 year later  | Yes  | n.a.  |
| Belgium        | Yes  | 5 years  | /   | Yes (not systematic)   | Varies  |
| Canada         | No   | /  | /   | No (with the exception of British Colombia)  | / (3-8 hours in British Colombia)                         |
| Chile          | No   | /  | /   | No   | /   |
| Czech Republic | No (in individual cases only)                  | /  | /   | Yes  | 25 lessons per week                                       |
| Denmark        | Yes  | 2-3 years  | Depends on municipality   | Yes  | 30 hours per week   |
| Estonia        |  |  |   | Yes  |   |
| Finland        |  |  |   |  |   |
| France         | No   | /  | /   | No   | /   |
| Germany        | Yes  | Varies across regions (3-5 years)                  | /   | Yes  | Varies across regions and programmes                      |
| Greece         | No   | /  | /   | Yes  | 25 teaching hours per week (via kindergarten)             |
| Hungary        | Yes  | 5 years (or earlier according to local capacities) | 5 years (if an earlier screening has been done before 5 years of age) | Yes  | Minimum 2 lessons per week; maximum 45 minutes per lesson |
| Iceland        |  |  |   |  |   |
| Ireland        | No   | /  | /   | No   | /   |
| Israel         |  |  |   |  |   |

|                 | Early language screening before primary school  |                   |  | Early language stimulation for children in need before primary school                     |  |
|-----------------|---|-------------------|--|---|--|
|                 | Yes/No  | If yes age at ... |  | Yes/No  | If yes, average number of hours per week |
|                 |   | 1st screening     | 2nd screening  |   |  |
| Italy           | No  | /                 | /  | No (not systematic but projects in selected kindergartens)                                | /  |
| Japan           |   |                   |  |   |  |
| Korea           |   |                   |  |   |  |
| Latvia          | No  | /                 | /  | No  | /  |
| Lithuania       | No (but pre-school teachers evaluate children's development including communication skills at pre-school age)             | /                 | /  | No (but the general programme of pre-school teaching includes basic communication skills) | /  |
| Luxembourg      | Yes   | 2.5 years         | Regulatory follow-ups are conducted until school age in case language difficulties are detected at first screening | Yes   | 8 hours per week                         |
| Mexico          | Yes   | Before 3 years    | /  | No  | /  |
| Netherlands     |   |                   |  | Yes   | 10                                       |
| New Zealand     | No  | /                 | /  | No  | /  |
| Norway          | Yes   | 2 years           | 4 years  | Yes   | n.a.                                     |
| Poland          | No  | /                 | /  | No  | /  |
| Portugal        |   |                   |  |   |  |
| Slovak Republic | Yes (for newly arrived children)  | At age of arrival | Depends on individual needs  | Yes   | n.a.                                     |
| Slovenia        | No  | /                 | /  | Yes   | n.a.                                     |
| Spain           |   |                   |  |   |  |
| Sweden          | No  | /                 | /  | Yes   | n.a.                                     |
| Switzerland     | No  | /                 | /  | Yes (not systematic)  | Varies across cantons                    |
| Turkey          | No  | /                 | /  | No  | /  |
| United Kingdom  | Yes   | 2-3 years         | 5 years  | Yes   | n.a.                                     |
| United States   | No but children are screened when they enter the public school system, which could be (pre-) kindergarten or first grade) | /                 | /  | No  | /  |

Note: "n.a." = information not available; "/" = not applicable.

Source: OECD questionnaire on the integration of young people with migrant parents 2017.

Table 2.2. Early Childhood Education and Care

|                 | Starting age of compulsory education      | Level of education   |                      | Yes/No | Legal entitlement to a place in ECEC            |   |
|-----------------|---|----------------------|----------------------|--------|---|---|
|                 |   | Pre-primary          | Primary              |        | If yes ...                                      |   |
|                 |   |                      |                      |        | From age  | Hours/week to which children are entitled         |
| Australia       | 5-6 years                                 |                      | ✓                    | Yes    | 4-5 years                                       | 15  |
| Austria         | 5 years                                   | ✓                    |                      | No     | /   | /   |
| Belgium         | 5 years                                   |                      | ✓                    | Yes    | 2.5 years                                       | 23.3 (Flemish community)<br>28 (French community) |
| Canada          | 5-6 years                                 |                      | ✓                    | No     | /   | /   |
| Chile           | 5 years                                   | ✓                    |                      | Yes    | 4 years (under certain conditions from 0 years) | 22  |
| Czech Republic  | 5 years                                   | ✓                    |                      | Yes    | 4 years   | 50  |
| Denmark         | 6 years                                   | ✓                    |                      | Yes    | 26 weeks  | n.a.  |
| Estonia         | 7 years                                   |                      | ✓                    | Yes    | 18 months                                       | n.a.  |
| Finland         | 6 years                                   | ✓                    |                      | Yes    | 0 years (from end of parental leave period)     | 50 (20 from 6 years onwards)                      |
| France          | 6 years                                   |                      | ✓                    | Yes    | 3 years   | 24  |
| Germany         | 6 years                                   |                      | ✓                    | Yes    | 1 year  | n.a.  |
| Greece          | 5 years                                   | ✓                    |                      | No     | /   | /   |
| Hungary         | 3 years                                   | ✓                    |                      | Yes    | 3 years   | n.a. (all day service for 50 weeks/year)          |
| Iceland         | 6 years                                   |                      | ✓                    | No     | /   | /   |
| Israel          | 3 years                                   | ✓                    |                      | Yes    | 3 years   | n.a.  |
| Ireland         | 6 years                                   |                      | ✓                    | Yes    | 3 years   | 15  |
| Italy           | 6 years                                   |                      | ✓                    | Yes    | 3 years   | 40  |
| Japan           | 6 years                                   |                      | ✓                    | No     | /   | /   |
| Korea           | 6 years                                   |                      | ✓                    | No     | /   | /   |
| Latvia          | 5 years                                   | ✓                    |                      | Yes    | 1.5 years                                       | n.a.  |
| Lithuania       | 6 years                                   | ✓                    |                      | No     | /   | /   |
| Luxembourg      | 4 years                                   | ✓                    |                      | Yes    | 3 years   | 26  |
| Mexico          | 3 years                                   | ✓                    |                      | Yes    | 3 years   | 15-20   |
| Netherlands     | 5 years                                   | ✓                    |                      | No     | /   | /   |
| New Zealand     | 6 years                                   |                      | ✓                    | No     | /   | /   |
| Norway          | 6 years                                   |                      | ✓                    | Yes    | 1 year  | 41  |
| Poland          | 6 years                                   | ✓                    |                      | Yes    | 3 years   | n.a.  |
| Portugal        | 6 years                                   |                      | ✓                    | Yes    | 3 years   | 40  |
| Slovak Republic | 6 years                                   |                      | ✓                    | Yes    | 3 years   | n.a.  |
| Slovenia        | 6 years                                   |                      | ✓                    | Yes    | 11 months                                       | 45  |
| Spain           | 6 years                                   |                      | ✓                    | Yes    | 3 years   | n.a.  |
| Sweden          | 7 years                                   |                      | ✓                    | Yes    | 1 year  | 15-50   |
| Switzerland     | 4 years in most cantons, 5 or 6 in others | ✓                    |                      | No     | /   | /   |
| Turkey          | 6 years                                   |                      | ✓                    | No     | /   | /   |
| United Kingdom  | 5 years                                   |                      | ✓                    | Yes    | 3 years   | 15  |
| United States   | Varies across states                      | Varies across states | Varies across states | No     | /   | /   |

Source: OECD (2017<sup>[18]</sup>) European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, (2016<sup>[26]</sup>) and OECD Secretariat analysis based on national legislation.

**Table 2.3. Free access to Early Childhood Education and Care, 2016 or latest available year**

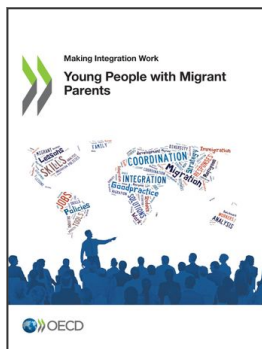
|                 | Legal entitlement to free access to ECEC   |  |                               |   |
|-----------------|--|--|-------------------------------|---|
|                 | Yes/No   | If yes ...                                     |                               |   |
|                 |  | From age                                       | Unconditional free access     | Conditional free access   |
| Australia       | No (but a means-tested subsidy is available)   | /  | /                             | /   |
| Austria         | Yes  | 0-4 years<br>5 years                           | ✓                             | ✓ (varies across states)  |
| Belgium         | Yes  | 0 years<br>2.5 years                           | ✓                             | ✓ (all registered jobseekers in training can be reimbursed for childcare) |
| Canada          | No (but subsidised fixed fee service for everyone in Quebec and means-tested cash payments or tax credit in other provinces) | /  | /                             | /   |
| Chile           | Yes  | 0 years<br>4 years                             | ✓                             | ✓   |
| Czech Republic  | Yes  | 5 years  | ✓                             |   |
| Denmark         | No (but subsidised and vouchers if family income is low)   | /  | /                             | /   |
| Estonia         | No (but subsidised)  | /  | /                             | /   |
| Finland         | Yes  | 0 years<br>6 years                             | ✓                             | ✓   |
| France          | Yes  | 2 years<br>3 years                             | ✓                             | ✓ (free in socially disadvantaged areas)                                  |
| Germany         | Differs across federal states  | Differs across federal states                  | Differs across federal states | Differs across federal states   |
| Greece          | Yes  | 5 years  | ✓                             |   |
| Hungary         | Yes  | 3 years (in some municipalities from 4 months) | ✓                             |   |
| Iceland         | No (but subsidised)  | /  | /                             | /   |
| Israel          | Yes  | 3 years)                                       | ✓                             |   |
| Ireland         | Yes  | 3 years  | ✓                             |   |
| Italy           | Yes  | 3 years  | ✓                             |   |
| Japan           | Yes  | 3 years  |                               | ✓   |
| Korea           | Yes  | 3 years  | ✓                             |   |
| Latvia          | Yes  | 1.5 years                                      | ✓                             |   |
| Lithuania       | Yes  | 6 years  | ✓                             |   |
| Luxembourg      | Yes  | 0 years<br>3 years                             | ✓                             | ✓   |
| Mexico          | Yes  | 3 years  | ✓                             |   |
| Netherlands     | No (but parents can receive income-related tax allowances for childcare)   | /  | /                             | /   |
| New Zealand     | Yes  | 3 years  | ✓                             |   |
| Norway          | Yes  | 3 years  |                               | ✓   |
| Poland          | Yes  | 5 years  | ✓                             |   |
| Portugal        | Yes  | 3 years  | ✓                             |   |
| Slovak Republic | Yes  | 3 years  | ✓                             |   |



|                | Legal entitlement to free access to ECEC |                      |                           |                         |
|----------------|--|----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
|                | Yes/No                                   | If yes ...           |                           |                         |
|                |  | From age             | Unconditional free access | Conditional free access |
| Slovenia       | Yes                                      | 11 months            |                           | ✓                       |
| Spain          | Yes                                      | 3 years              | ✓                         |                         |
| Sweden         | Yes                                      | 3 years              | ✓                         |                         |
| Switzerland    | Yes                                      | 4 years              | ✓                         |                         |
| Turkey         | No (but subsidised)                      | /                    | /                         | /                       |
| United Kingdom | Yes                                      | 3 years              | ✓                         |                         |
| United States  | Varies across states                     | Varies across states | Varies across states      | Varies across states    |

Note: Unconditional free access refers to provision free of charge for all children of the concerned age group. Conditional free access means that free access is granted based on certain conditions, such as income, benefit entitlements, etc.

Source: OECD (2017<sup>[18]</sup>) European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, (2016<sup>[26]</sup>) and OECD Secretariat analysis based on national legislation.



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