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BRIEF



Massachusetts' Working Families Need Early Care and Education

Policymakers must support early learning to benefit children and families, public safety, and national security

There are approximately 430,000 children under age 6 in Massachusetts, and the parents of 74 percent of these children work outside the home.[1] Parents need early care and education (ECE) so they can go to work, remain productive, and build successful careers to support their families. Children depend on nurturing, stimulating environments, at home and in ECE, during these critical years of brain development.

Research demonstrates the benefits of high-quality ECE for children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. For example, a longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in higher-quality child care were better prepared for school at age 4 compared to those in lower-quality child care. At age 15, they were still performing slightly above their peers and had significantly lower levels of behavior problems.[2] Children who spent more time in child care in their early years, and those who were in center-based care, were more likely to participate in organized activities in middle childhood, and reported less contact with police at age 26.[3] ECE programs that emphasize healthy eating and physical activity can help reduce children's risk of obesity. For example, a study of North Carolina's Abecedarian ECE program found that girls who participated were less likely to become obese as adults, and boys had fewer risk factors for heart disease, stroke and diabetes.[4]

Quality preschool programs also have positive effects on children's development. Children not served by the Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPC) preschool program were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18.[5] By age 24, the people served by the CPC were 20 percent less likely to have served time in jail or prison.[6]

> “If we want today’s youth to be successful, we need to invest where it matters: in quality programs during their earliest years.”



Brian Kyes
Chief of Police
Chelsea Police Department

Early care and education also contributes to public safety and national security

Beyond benefits for individual children and families, however, quality ECE also strengthens our state and our nation. Our national security relies on qualified young adults who are ready, willing, and able to serve in the U.S. military. However, educational deficits, health issues (obesity), and behavior problems (substance abuse and crime) currently prevent 69 percent of Massachusetts youth from qualifying for service.[7] There is scientific consensus that early brain development sets the stage for children’s future success. Without a solid ECE system, our nation risks having an even smaller recruiting pool in the future.

Further, Massachusetts’ jails are full of people serving time for serious and costly crimes. It doesn’t have to be that way. Providing at-risk kids with high-quality early learning opportunities can help reduce the human and fiscal costs of crime in the future.

Massachusetts families do not have the early care and education they need

Despite the value of ECE to families, our state, and the nation, many Massachusetts families do not have the ECE they need. ECE is unaffordable for many families, especially those with low incomes. Infant care in a center in Massachusetts averages nearly $21,000 per year, compared to $13,200 for public college tuition.[8] A married couple with two children living in poverty in Massachusetts would have to spend 145 percent of their annual income on care (compared to the seven percent defined as affordable).[9]

Massachusetts Pre-K programs are an option for three- and four-year-old children, to cover part of parents’ working days. But, the programs served just 30 percent of four-year-olds and 16 percent of three-year-olds in 2019.[10] Moreover, state funding for the program has mostly decreased over time (adjusting for inflation).

Subsidies help Massachusetts working families with low incomes afford ECE

The commonwealth’s Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) provides subsidies to eligible families to help them pay for early care and education.[11] In addition to meeting income requirements, parents must be employed, participating in an approved education or training program, or receiving or at-risk of receiving child protective services.[12]

However, Massachusetts' subsidy reimbursement rates fall below the level recommended by the federal government (the 75th percentile of current market rates).[13] The inadequate reimbursement rates impede families' ability to access ECE, as some providers will not enroll children who receive subsidies, since subsidies do not cover the cost of care. The low rates also result in inadequate compensation for ECE providers. Early childhood teachers earn substantially less than kindergarten teachers: in Massachusetts, the annual mean wage for child care teachers is $33,120, and for preschool teachers is $43,120, compared to $80,700 for kindergarten teachers.[14] Given the low wages in the field, between 2009 and 2013, more than one-third (34 percent) of ECE teachers nationwide had to rely on public assistance to meet the needs of their own families.[15] Attracting and retaining a high-quality early childhood workforce requires adequate compensation.[16]

Massachusetts policymakers must support early care and education

Massachusetts policymakers must sustain the historic investments made in early care and education in the FY21 state budget with at least level funding in FY22. This includes $5 million for local preschool collaborations, as well as subsidy funding and rate increases benefitting children statewide, birth through school-age. To build back stronger, and bring about the systemic change that is needed in early education and care, policymakers must pass the Common Start bill for affordable, accessible, high-quality early education and care.



High-quality early care and education has myriad benefits for children, families, our state and the nation. Support for high-quality early care and education is an investment in our future public safety, national security, and economic well-being.

Endnotes

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1212 New York Avenue NW / Suite 300 / Washington, DC 20005 / 202.464.7005

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