COUNCIL FOR A
STRONG AMERICA

REPORT

High-Quality Early Childhood Programs are Key for a Strong Pennsylvania

Home visiting, child care, and preschool can help grow the economy, increase public safety, and enhance national security



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Summary

High-quality early childhood programs can contribute to public safety and a strong economy, and enhance national security. Research shows that experiences children have in their earliest years, during a period of critical brain growth, set the foundation for future development.[1] Children who experience warm, responsive parenting, and nurturing child care and preschool programs that stimulate their cognitive, social, and emotional development are set on a path to productive adulthood. Children who lack these quality environments early in life often arrive at school already behind their peers and may never catch up—underperforming in third-grade reading and math, more likely to be held back in school, and less likely to graduate from high school on time.

Children's early experiences also have consequences for 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, substance use, and crime currently prevent 71 percent of Pennsylvania youth from qualifying for service.[2] Pennsylvania's jails are full of people serving time for serious and costly crimes, many of whom lack high school diplomas that would qualify them for legitimate employment.[3] Pennsylvania's businesses need a steady supply of educated, skilled young people to build a strong, competitive workforce.

Pennsylvania policymakers must support high-quality early childhood programs, including home visiting, child care, and preschool, to provide our children with the strong foundation they need to contribute to the future strength of our state and our nation.

Early Childhood Policy Priorities for a Stronger Pennsylvania

Investments in Pennsylvania's children, beginning in the earliest years of their lives, can help ensure our state's future safety and productivity, and enhance national security.

Support families through voluntary, evidence-based home visiting programs

To provide parent education and support, home visiting programs pair a trained professional with young families who face multiple challenges. Research on several different evidence-based home visiting models shows that these programs have a range of benefits for children and families, including: reductions in child abuse, improved child health, enhanced academic outcomes, and lower spending on costly social services.[4] For example, a longitudinal study of the Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) program over two decades demonstrated that, by age 15, children in NFP had half as many verified incidents of child abuse and neglect as children in the control group who didn't participate.[5] These results are particularly important, given the link between experiencing child abuse and neglect and an increased risk of later criminal behavior.[6]

Home visiting programs can also help prepare kids for school. For instance, studies of Healthy Families America home visiting model found that children who participated in the program showed improved cognitive development at one and two years, and fewer problem behaviors that can interfere with learning at two and three years. These early impacts lead to success in school.[7]

Just over 17,000 families are served by evidence-based home visiting programs that receive state funding in Pennsylvania, including Early Head Start, Family Check-Up®, Healthy Families America, Nurse-Family Partnership, Parents as Teachers, and SafeCare Augmented®.[8]

> "Family first, firm second: It's why having available and affordable quality child care options matter so much to employees and businesses."



Jack Brennan
Chairman Emeritus, Vanguard

Grow access to high-quality, affordable early care and education (ECE)

Nearly three-quarters (71 percent) of Pennsylvania children under age 6 have all parents in the workforce.[9] Working parents depend on ECE (child care and preschool) so they can go to work, remain productive, and build successful careers to support their families. Children need nurturing, stimulating environments for healthy brain development during the first five years of life, both at home and in ECE, led by a skilled and stable teaching workforce, while their parents work. Further, early childhood is a time when children acquire the foundation of many skills needed for jobs,

including both cognitive and character skills.[10] Quality ECE can help build these skills.

Decades of research have shown the short- and long-term benefits of high-quality ECE programs for children's development along several dimensions, particularly for children from families with low incomes.[11] 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 children in lower-quality child care. At age 15, they were still performing slightly above their peers.[12]

Studies support the effectiveness of high-quality preschool programs as well. Students who participated in Pennsylvania's Pre-K Counts program outperformed their peers in language and math skills in kindergarten, showing four to five months of additional learning.[13] New Jersey's preschool program reported impacts on math and literacy that persisted through tenth grade.[14] The Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPC) preschool reported a 29 percent increase in high school graduation rates among its participants.[15] The fact that six out of 10 prisoners nationwide do not have a high school diploma illustrates the importance of education for crime prevention.[16]

The considerations around high-quality ECE transcend even impressive educational outcomes. Our national security relies on qualified young adults who are ready, willing, and able to serve in the U.S. military. However, educational deficits (lack of a high school diploma or failure on the military's entrance exam), crime, substance use, and health issues (particularly obesity) currently prevent 71 percent of Pennsylvania youth from qualifying for service.[17] Early development sets the stage for children's future success, and the foundation of lifelong health is established early in life. In addition to its educational benefits, ECE programs that emphasize healthy eating and physical activity can help reduce children's risk of obesity.[18] Without access to high-quality ECE, our nation risks having an even smaller recruiting pool in the future.

Further, our state's correctional system is full of people convicted of serious and costly crimes. It doesn't have to be that way. Providing children with high-quality early learning opportunities can set them on the path to success in school, so they will be ready for the workforce and less likely to later engage in criminal activity.[19] The

> "Being smart on crime means addressing its root causes, including child abuse and neglect, lack of educational attainment, substance use and other underlying challenges."



David W. Sunday, Jr.
York County District Attorney

aforementioned longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in higher-quality child care had significantly lower levels of behavior problems at age 15 compared to children in lower-quality child care.[20] Students who participated in Alabama's First Class Pre-K program were about half as likely to have a behavioral infraction in school as those who did not receive First Class Pre-K.[21]

A smaller-but-significant number of long-term studies directly examine the link between preschool participation and crime prevention. An MIT study of the Boston preschool program found that enrollees were less likely to have been incarcerated in a juvenile facility during high school, compared to non-enrollees.[22] Children not served by the Chicago CPC early education program were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18.[23] By age 24, the people served by the CPC were 20 percent less likely to have served time in jail or prison.[24]

Pennsylvania Policymakers Must Enhance Early Childhood Programs

Despite demonstrated need and research-backed benefits, too many of our state's children lack access to high-quality early childhood programs. Only five percent of children under age 6 in low-income families who could benefit from home visiting programs can be served with available funding.[25] Just 41 percent of Pennsylvania children under age 5 are in quality child care [26] and only 36 percent have access to high-quality pre-K. [27]

> "Pennsylvania's children deserve the best we can provide, so they can one day be their best for our country."



Rear Admiral (Ret.) Thomas J. Wilson III
U.S. Navy

State policymakers always have difficult funding decisions to make, but it is vital to families that we continue our investments in early childhood programs. Further, in order to sustain the gains children make in early education programs, it is essential that Pennsylvania's K-12 education system is adequately funded. Research shows that children's progress is sustained when preschool is followed by high-quality kindergarten and early grade educational experiences.[28]

Conclusion

High-quality home visiting, child care, and preschool are critical to ensuring Pennsylvania's children get the best start possible. State policymakers must continue to invest in these programs as a matter of public safety and national security, and to support our state's current and future workforce. Action now can improve the experiences of Pennsylvania's children today and strengthen our state in the years to come.

Endnotes

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