

# High-Quality Early Childhood Programs are Key for a Strong New Mexico

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



## Acknowledgements

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## Summary

**High-quality early childhood programs can contribute to public safety, help build 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.<sup>1</sup> 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, issues like educational deficits, health issues, substance abuse, and crime prevent 72 percent of New Mexico youth from qualifying for service.<sup>2</sup> New Mexico'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.<sup>3</sup> New Mexico's businesses need a steady supply of educated, skilled young people to build a strong workforce to compete in the global economy.

New Mexico voters recognize the importance of the early years and providing appropriate supports, with 70 percent approving a constitutional amendment that creates a dedicated funding stream for early childhood education.<sup>4</sup> New Mexico policymakers must support these 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 New Mexico**

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

#### **Support families through voluntary 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 home visiting models shows that they have a range of benefits for children and families, including: reductions in child abuse, improved child health, enhanced

academic outcomes, and lower spending on social services.<sup>5</sup> For example, a longitudinal study of home visiting followed participants in the Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) program over two decades. It 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.<sup>6</sup> These results are particularly important, given the link between child abuse and neglect and later criminal behavior.<sup>7</sup>

Home visiting programs can also help prepare children for school. For instance, studies of Healthy Families America 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.<sup>8</sup>

Nearly 5,700 families are served by home visiting programs in New Mexico, including Early Head Start, Family Spirit, Nurse-Family Partnership, Parents as Teachers, Partners for A Healthy Baby / Nurturing Parenting, and First Born.<sup>9</sup> However, there is much unmet need.

#### **Grow access to high-quality early care and education (ECE)**

Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of New Mexico's children under age 6 have all available parents in the workforce.<sup>10</sup> Working parents depend on ECE (child care and preschool) so they can go to work, remain productive, and build successful careers to better support their families. Children need nurturing, stimulating environments for healthy brain development during the first years of life, both at home and in ECE while their parents work. Further, early childhood is a time when children

acquire the foundation of many skills needed for 21st-century jobs, including both cognitive and social skills.<sup>11</sup> Quality ECE can help build these skills and contribute to educational success.

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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> By age 26, participants from families with low-incomes who spent two or more years in high-quality child care were more likely to graduate from college and had higher salaries, compared to those who had been in lower-quality care.<sup>14</sup>

Despite demonstrated need and research-backed benefits, too many of our state's children lack access to high-quality child care. Prior to the pandemic, 53 percent of New Mexico residents lived in a child care "desert," where there are more than three children under age 5 for every licensed child care slot.<sup>15</sup> Availability is especially limited for families who have infants and toddlers, have low incomes, work non-traditional hours, or live in rural areas.

Quality is key for achieving lasting impacts on children. Yet slightly less than half (44 percent) of New Mexico's licensed child care slots are at the highest level of quality in the state's FOCUS on Young Children's Learning tiered quality rating and improvement system.<sup>16</sup>



Studies from multiple states support the effectiveness of high-quality preschool programs as well. For example, children who participated in New Mexico PreK, compared to non-participants, had higher rates of on-time high school graduation. Differences were even larger for English language learners and children from lower income families.<sup>17</sup> The fact that six out of 10 prisoners nationwide do not have a high school diploma illustrates the importance of education for crime prevention.<sup>18</sup>

Boston's preschool program improved mathematics, literacy, and language skills among participating children equivalent to seven months of additional learning at kindergarten entry, compared with children who did not attend.<sup>19</sup> An evaluation of the Arkansas Better Chance preschool program found that attendees were less likely to be held back in school by the end of third grade than those who didn't attend any pre-K.<sup>20</sup> New Jersey's preschool program reported impacts on math and literacy that



persisted through 10th grade.<sup>21</sup> The Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPC) pre-K reported a 29-percent increase in high school graduation rates among its participants.<sup>22</sup>

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) prevent

74 percent of New Mexico youth from qualifying for service.<sup>23</sup> 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. For example, a study of the 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.<sup>24</sup> 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 serving time for 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.<sup>25</sup> The 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.<sup>26</sup> 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 pre-K.<sup>27</sup> Further, the differences between the two groups were larger in middle school and high school, when the rates of infractions increased.

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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> By age 24, the people served by the CPC were 20 percent less likely to have served time in jail or prison.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

New Mexico policymakers must support early childhood programs. High-quality home visiting, child care, and preschool are critical to ensuring New Mexico'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 New Mexico's children today and strengthen our state in the years to come.

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