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BRIEF



High-Quality Early Childhood Programs are Key for a Strong North Carolina

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

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.[1] Infants and toddlers who experience warm, responsive parenting and nurturing child care programs that stimulate their development are set on a path to productive adulthood. Young children who lack these quality environments early in life often arrive at school already behind their peers and may never catch up—underperforming in 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 problems, substance abuse, and crime prevent 72 percent of North Carolina youth from qualifying for service.[2] North Carolina'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] North Carolina's businesses need a steady supply of educated, skilled young people to build a strong workforce to compete in the global economy.

North Carolina policymakers must support high-quality early childhood programs, including home visiting and child care, to provide our infants and toddlers with the strong foundation they need to contribute to the future strength of our state and our nation. In particular, legislators should provide

additional state matching funds and increased state investments to draw down federal dollars for home visiting programs, increase child care subsidy rates, and enact a pilot program that would help families ineligible for child care subsidies afford care.

Early Childhood Policy Priorities for a Stronger North Carolina

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.[4] Impacts on child abuse are especially important,[5] given the link between child abuse and later criminal behavior.[6] More than 9,500 families are served by several home visiting programs in North Carolina.[7] However, there is much unmet need.[8]

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

More than half (58.5 percent) of North Carolina's children under age 3 have mothers in the workforce[9] and two-thirds (66 percent) of children under age 6 have all available parents in the workforce.[10] Working parents depend on child care so they can go to work and support their families. Children need nurturing, stimulating environments for healthy brain development, both at home and in ECE while their parents work.

Decades of research have shown the short- and long-term benefits of high-quality ECE programs for children's development

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along several dimensions, particularly for children from families with low incomes.[11] Benefits include increased school readiness, enhanced academic performance, fewer behavior problems, and higher educational attainment.[12] The fact that 60 percent of prisoners nationwide do not have a high school diploma illustrates the importance of education for crime prevention.[13]

Despite demonstrated need and research-backed benefits, too many of our state's children lack access to high-quality child care.[14] The problem is particularly acute for families with very young children, as infant and toddler care is the least available and most expensive. Infant care in a center in North Carolina averages $11,202 per year, more than in-state public college tuition ($7,389).[15] NC Child Care Subsidy Assistance helps working families with low incomes afford child care, but subsidy rates are outdated and inadequate.[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. ECE programs that emphasize healthy eating and physical activity can help reduce children's risk of obesity, a major disqualifier for military service.[17] 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.[18]

North Carolina Policymakers Must Support Early Childhood Programs

High-quality home visiting and child care are critical to ensuring North Carolina's infants and toddlers 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 North Carolina's children today and strengthen our state in the years to come.

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