COUNCIL FOR A
STRONG AMERICA

REPORT

Child Care Early Educators Set Michigan's Young Children on the Path to Success

A qualified, well-compensated teaching staff is key to quality child care



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Council for a Strong America is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites membership organizations, including law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, and business executives, that promote solutions ensuring that our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

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Summary

Quality child care can strengthen Michigan's current and future workforce, contribute to a strong state economy and public safety, and enhance national security. Increasing investments in Michigan's child care system will help it better meet the needs of infants and toddlers, older children, families, and early childhood educators. When families do not have the child care they need, parents' work productivity falls, resulting in costs to parents, their employers, and taxpayers. Lack of access to quality child care also places children from families with low incomes at risk of starting school already behind their more advantaged peers. Inadequate compensation and subpar working conditions for early educators results in high levels of turnover, impacting the quality of programs.

There are other consequences as well. Although Michigan has made great strides in recent years, too many Michiganders still have contact with the criminal justice system. Providing children who historically have been underserved with high-quality early learning opportunities can help reduce the human and fiscal costs of crime in the future by setting children up for success in school. Further, 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, and other problems (substance misuse and crime) prevent 71 percent of Michigan youth from qualifying for service.[1] Healthy early development sets the stage for children's future success. Without improvements to the child care system, our nation risks having an even smaller military recruiting pool in the future.



The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated longstanding challenges faced by Michigan's child care system. Michigan experienced a net loss of 637 child care providers during the pandemic, further impairing a sector that cannot meet the overwhelming demand for its services. Thus, many parents, especially mothers, have been forced to reduce their work hours or leave the workforce.

A fundamental feature of child care quality is highly-qualified early educators who are well-trained before and during their service and who need to be equitably compensated. Michigan policymakers must address the needs of the child care workforce to ensure that families have the programs they need, parents can stay in their jobs, and young children can be set on the path to success. In particular, Michigan must improve compensation for the child care workforce; strengthen career pathways, professional development and collaboration; and conduct a public awareness campaign to elevate the value of the early childhood workforce and support recruitment of new talent. Lawmakers can take action now to improve workforce compensation and make child care a more attractive field by supporting Governor Whitmer's proposed tax credit for child care educators. Action and innovation now can improve the experiences of Michigan children today and strengthen our state in the years to come.

Most Michigan parents are in the workforce and need child care

More than two-thirds (69 percent) of infants and toddlers in Michigan have mothers in the workforce[2] and many of these very young children are in child care while their parents work. Child care settings are a key environment for children, particularly given the importance of the early years for brain development.

Even prior to the pandemic, Michigan's child care system did not meet the needs of parents, children, or employers. Nearly half (44 percent) of Michigan residents lived in a child care desert, an area in which there are at least three times as many children as licensed child care slots.[3] Availability is especially limited for families who live in rural areas, have infants and toddlers, or work evening and night shifts.[4]

Providing quality child care, particularly for infants and toddlers, requires significant resources, and families often cannot bear

> An investment in the early childhood education workforce is an investment in the future of Michigan's children and the prosperity of the state."



Milton Scales
ML Scales & Associates, LLC, Okemos

that expense alone. The cost of infant care in a Michigan center averages $13,458 per year, almost as expensive as in-state public college tuition ($14,339).[5]

Beyond the negative effects on children and families, problems with child care inflict a huge economic toll. Our recent ReadyNation national study of working parents of children under age 3 found that, when families do not have the child care they need, parents' work productivity falls, resulting in costs to parents, their employers, and, ultimately, taxpayers.[6] These child care challenges cost the nation $122 billion in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue each year. The estimate for Michigan is $3 billion per year in losses due to the child care crisis for infants and toddlers alone.

COVID-19 exacerbated Michigan's child care challenges

The effects of the pandemic further stressed an already fragile child care system that could not meet the overwhelming demand for its services. Michigan experienced a net loss of 637 child care providers during the pandemic (a 7 percent loss)[7] and remaining providers struggle with staff shortages.[8] Probably not coincidentally, the labor force participation rate of mothers with children ages birth to 4 declined from 71 percent in 2019 to 65 percent in 2020, and has still not fully recovered.[9]

Research shows that high-quality child care supports children's development

Studies have shown the benefits of high-quality child care. 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 than children in lower-quality child care. At age 15, they were still performing slightly above their peers and also experienced significantly lower levels of behavior problems.[10] 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.[11]

Another study found that children who were randomly selected to attend a high-quality child care and early education program from ages 2 to 3 had fewer behavior problems than children who were not selected.[12]

In sum, child care programs can set children on a path to successful adulthood. However, child care must be high-quality in order to help children develop critical skills needed for success in school and life. **Among the most fundamental of these quality features are highly-qualified early educators.**

Early educators are the foundation of high-quality child care

Research indicates that a well-qualified workforce is an essential, fundamental component of high-quality child care. Highly-qualified early educators engage in warm, nurturing interactions with the children to support their development in all areas. Excellent educators also provide developmentally-appropriate instruction in key early literacy, math and other academic skills.[13] To offer this high-quality experience, child care educators must be well-trained, both before they start teaching and once they are on the job through ongoing professional development.[14] Adequate compensation is key to attracting and retaining top talent.[15] Retaining educators is particularly important for young children, since positive, stable relationships support healthy development.

Key elements of a highly-qualified early care and education workforce

Education: The level of education required for early childhood educators has been a matter of long-standing debate. Much research, including a comprehensive review of 48 studies by the Campbell Collaboration, has found that higher education levels have a strong relationship to higher quality in early education.[16]

Professional development: Studies show that effective professional development is:

- Classroom-focused: related to what early educators are actually teaching;
- Active: allows for hands-on practice of skills;
- Collaborative: with modeling and/or coaching of skills and feedback provided.[17]

> “America’s kids are our future. We must invest in them now to secure our future. Supporting early education is a great place to start!”



Sheriff Scott Wriggelsworth
Ingham County Sheriff’s Office

However, providers face barriers to participating in professional development, including long work hours and low compensation.[18] Further, investments in professional development can be lost when early educators leave their jobs, often due to inadequate compensation.[19]

Compensation: Adequate compensation is required to attract and retain a high-quality child care workforce.[20] But in Michigan, the annual mean wage for child care educators is $26,680, compared to $35,950 for pre-K teachers, and $59,910 for kindergarten teachers.[21] Early childhood educators in Michigan have a poverty rate of 19 percent, compared to 11 percent for workers overall.[22] Low compensation is a major factor in child care educators leaving the field.[23]

The path forward for Michigan

Bolstering the child care workforce is an essential aspect of increasing supply and children’s access. Michigan policymakers must address each of the key elements of child care workforce quality in a comprehensive strategy, because the



elements are interrelated. For example, if compensation remains low, early educators will have neither the means nor the incentive to pursue intensive professional development. Similarly, the type and amount of professional development required will vary depending on the level and quality of early educator pre-service training.

Policymakers must continue to invest in the Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) Early Childhood® Michigan Scholarship Program[24] and additional strategies to ensure that all early educators receive the training, support, and professional compensation they need to provide high-quality early learning experiences for children. In particular, and in line with recommendations from Think Babies Michigan,[25] the state must:

- Provide adequate compensation for the child care workforce, establishing and implementing wage scales that are aligned with the research done by Prenatal-to-Five Fiscal Strategies.
- Strengthen career pathways and professional development, in collaboration with intermediate school districts and higher education institutions, creating a career lattice to improve professional development, pathways, and other supports.
- Conduct a public awareness campaign to lift the value of the early childhood workforce and to support recruitment of new talent.
- Build on the state government efforts to require implicit bias training for licensed health care workers through implementation of this requirement for those in the early childhood workforce.

Governor Whitmer proposed a solution for chronically low wages, a $1,000-3,000 refundable early childhood educator tax credit. The credit would vary based on early educators' experience and education, and requires them to work at least part-time in a licensed facility that participates in Great Start to Quality and MiRegistry. A group of 176 early childhood organizations and 139

individuals recently urged the legislature to take up this proposal, and made the following requests:

- Granting the workforce $3,000-9,000 in refundable tax credits, and expanding them to all staff employed at early childhood education programs. This credit would incentivize promising professionals to join the field.
- Ensuring that early childhood experts, educators, and other stakeholders are consulted in the development of this legislation so that it has the greatest positive impact on the early childhood field.
- Learning from the implementation of Louisiana's School Readiness Tax Credit by designing the credit to adjust for inflation using an indicator like the Consumer Price Index.
- Implementing a disbursement schedule that will work best for early educators, such as a monthly or quarterly tax credit, and developing a streamlined, user-friendly application process so that all early childhood educators can benefit.

Further, it is critical to support the equitable and sustainable expansion of Michigan's early care and education registered apprenticeships, which are a time-tested, powerful workforce strategy that can address significant workforce barriers. By financing the attainment of a credential/degree, raising wages for competencies gained, and providing academic and nonacademic supports necessary for non-traditional adult learners and youth to be successful, these apprenticeships can become a crucial recruitment and retention strategy for the state's child care employers.

> "Our armed forces need young people who are well-educated and disciplined. The path to these outcomes begins in high-quality early childhood education programs."



Major General (Ret.) Thomas G. Cutler
U.S. Air Force, DeWitt

Conclusion

High-quality child care is a powerful means of supporting children's development while their parents work. However, this potential will only be fully realized when children can attend quality programs with a highly-qualified child care workforce with meaningful education, ongoing professional development, and sufficient compensation. Support for high-quality child care, particularly for infants and toddlers, is an investment in our future public safety, national security, and economic well-being.

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Notes

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