

Affordable Early Education and Care Programs Benefits Everyone

By Karen R. Johnson

Access to quality early education and care for children in Texas is critical. Research shows that children who participate in these programs fare better in school and life. In addition to higher rates of education, employment and income, children who participate in high-quality, early childhood programs are healthier and well-adjusted. The cascading effects bring out stronger families and communities. Unfortunately, preschool programs such as Head Start, public Pre-K and all sectors of child care are severely underfunded, serving only a portion of eligible children in the state.

The current state of early education and care in Texas does not reflect what we already know about the benefits of early quality childhood care. Research shows that high-quality, early education and care--provided at home or in other arrangements--is essential for children to develop socially and cognitively and to enter school ready to succeed.

Parents have a critical role to play in deciding which style of care best fits the needs of the child and the family, be it child care, Pre-K, Head Start, or keeping the child at home. According to Census 2000 data, 53.3 percent of Texas children under age 6 have a single parent or both parents working in the workforce. An increasing number of children will require some form of non-parental care during their preschool years, and parents must have affordable and quality options for early childhood programs.

Access to quality early education and care programs is a challenge facing families of all incomes in Texas. Child care is the second largest budget item for many families. The cost of quality child care for a 4-year-old in an urban area center can cost \$4,000 to \$10,000 a year, rivaling the average tuition cost at a public university. The numbers do not add up: many families are forced to choose between rent, food, utilities and child care.

Parents must feel confident that the programs available to their children will provide the atmosphere their growing child needs to fully realize his or her potential. A majority of parents cannot afford to "shop around" for the best fit for their child, nor can they afford to pay for top-ranked elite preschools. Parents may be forced to choose a form of out-of-home care that does not promote the physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of their child.

Employers should consider the impact the cost of preschool programs has on employee performance. The National Child Care Information Center reports that U.S. employers pay an additional \$3 billion per year because of absence related to care and educational needs. Inadequate care increases parents' stress and causes them to miss work. Many parents working low-wage jobs are only one child care arrangement away from turning to welfare. On the other hand, parents who have access to affordable and quality early childhood programs are more likely to maintain employment.

Quality early education and care programs have a greater benefit for low-income children. The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, a well-respected, long-term research study, tracked at-risk children over a 20-year period. It found that children enrolled in high-quality, center-based early education and care programs had more years of completed schooling, higher monthly incomes and higher percentages of home ownership and employment rates. The children also exhibited lower rates of need for social services and fewer arrests by age 27. Everyone in the community benefited, including parents, educators, law enforcement officials, businesses and individual taxpayers.

The benefit to communities is further demonstrated in a report from The Waisman Center, Institute for Research on Poverty. It shows that for every \$1 invested in high-quality, center-based early education and care, communities save approximately \$7 through the increased likelihood that children will be literate, socially well-adjusted, employed and enrolled in postsecondary education.

Let's make sure that those who must use out-of-home care for their child during the preschool years have access to high-quality care. We must work together to build a system of quality, early education and care that meets the needs of parents and children throughout our state.

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