

Early Learning Systems of Care: A Proven Investment Strategy

A White Paper



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Background

Early childhood lays the foundation for future development. It is a time of great opportunity when children learn in leaps and bounds. Compelling research supports the lifelong impact of what happens during early childhood development, and there is hard economic evidence that early childhood investments yield long-term gains. Good policies and programs help improve the odds that children will receive the supports they need in order to grow and develop to their optimal capacity as Florida citizens.

Positive early childhood development depends on good health, nurturing families, and high quality early learning experiences.¹ Families with young children are frequently early in their employment history and struggle financially as they try to meet the needs of their family. Many do not have extended family support. Others experience extreme stressors such as poverty and poor health. A three-part framework of early childhood policies and services – promoting healthy development, effective parenting, and high-quality early learning opportunities – can change the trajectory of development for children. State policymakers make important decisions that can positive effects on the development for children.

Although this paper focuses on early learning opportunities, it does not ignore the importance of the framework. High quality early learning services include linkages to health and family supports, and Florida is making strides in insuring these connections are made through the work of state agencies, the Florida Children and Youth Cabinet, and dedicated service providers and stakeholders.

Issues: Benefits and Challenges of High Quality Early Learning Opportunities

High quality early learning opportunities have a positive impact on Florida in three primary ways. First, high quality early learning opportunities support school success, health, and future work productivity of children. Brain science and developmental research demonstrate the importance of the quality of children's earliest relationships and experiences.² By age 5, a child's brain reaches 85% of its adult weight, developing connections that are important to problem-solving, critical thinking, and getting along with others. Well-designed early learning programs are associated with higher achievement test scores, lower rates of grade retention and special education, higher education attainment, reduced delinquency and crime, and improved employment rates. Children that are economically disadvantaged reap the greatest long-term benefits from early learning opportunities, but children from all backgrounds have been found to benefit from high quality experiences.³

Early learning services also impact worker productivity. Florida employers need the best, most skilled employees now and in the future. They need employees with low absenteeism rates that are not distracted because they are worried about their child while they are at work, and they need public policies that support development of the next generation of smart, innovative, and team-capable workers.⁴ Child care assistance can make a difference now and in the long-term. For the average family eligible for Florida School Readiness subsidies, child care costs average 7% of family income with the subsidy and an unaffordable 50% of income without the subsidy, and low-income mothers who receive child care assistance are 40% more likely to remain employed after two years.

¹ Stebbins & Knitzer (2007), *State Early Childhood Policies*, National Center for Children in Poverty.

² Thompson (2008), *Connecting neurons, concepts, and people: Brain development and its implications*. National Institute for Early Education Research.

³ Barnett (2008), *Preschool education and its lasting effects: Research and policy implications*. Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit [<http://epicpolicy.org/publication/preschool-education>].

⁴ Partnership for America's Economic Success (2009). *Investing in America's children: The business case* [www.PartnershipforSuccess.org]. Washington, D.C.: author.

As a third benefit, the child care industry provides direct employment for approximately 71,000 Floridians, generating over \$1.1 billion in wages and an additional \$1.8 billion in revenues for supportive industries. This results in the generation of important goods and services to the Florida economy as well as tax-paying individuals and businesses.

The challenges to the system are tied to the opportunities. High quality early learning programs are not the norm. Assessments of child care quality find that the vast majority is 'fair' or 'mediocre', only 11% is of excellent quality, and up to 10% is actually harmful to children's development.⁵ Child care licensing regulations set the framework for quality of care, and although Florida is ranked 2nd in oversight, it is 30th nationally for the quality and rigor of its child care licensing standards.⁶

Florida's investment of \$145 million in General Revenue funding for school readiness results in an additional \$253 million for the system in federal funds. Florida also utilizes \$239 million in federal TANF funding for school readiness. Along with local contributions, this funding provides child care subsidies to approximately 250,000 children and enables 150,000 low-income parents to work. Unfortunately, only 30% of the estimated eligible families were served in 2007-08, and 58,000 children are a subsidized child care waiting list.⁷

The early care and education industry provides an additional challenge. A mixture of public and private entities provide early learning services and operate in a market system that is not supportive of the costs of quality. Families with young children are the primary payers of the system and are not able to support the costs associated with widely recognized ingredients of quality - low adult-child ratios, small group sizes, and staff with specialized training and education and adequate wages. Average wages of child care staff are low, under \$9 an hour⁸, and benefits are few. Not surprisingly, staff turnover is high (estimated at a minimum of 30%).

Recommendations

- Support the continued development of a comprehensive and unified system of early childhood policies and services with particular attention for infant and toddler care
- Ensure Florida's system of early learning services is organized, administered, and funded in ways that maximize federal funding opportunities
- Improve Florida child care licensing standards, developing a stronger base for quality of care
- Support the development of an early learning professional development system that includes training and education scholarships, career advising, and wage incentives
- Ensure early learning opportunities recognize and focus on all aspects of children's development, acknowledging how social-emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development are intertwined

The Association of Early Learning Coalitions (AELC) is an organization consisting of the Executive Directors of the 31 Early Learning Coalitions, providing services in all counties and communities across Florida. AELC provides leadership for the early learning community, sharing best practices, strengthening early learning management systems, and advising the Agency for Workforce Innovation regarding early learning issues and policies from a local perspective.

⁵ NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (2002). Characteristics and quality of child care for toddlers and preschoolers, Applied Developmental Sciences.

⁶ National Association of Child care Resource and Referral Agency (2009). We can do better: 2009 Update of NACCRRRA's ranking of state child care regulations and oversight. Washington, D.C.: author.

⁷ Agency for Workforce Innovation (2009). Office of Early Learning Research Bulletin, 1(1) [http://www.floridajobs.org/earlylearning/Research_Bulletin_Vol1_Issue1/index.htm].

⁸ Agency for Workforce Innovation (2009). Office of Early Learning Research Bulletin, 1(1) [http://www.floridajobs.org/earlylearning/Research_Bulletin_Vol1_Issue1/index.htm].