Early Learning in the District of Columbia

By Jessica Troe  July 2016

District of Columbia families need access to affordable child care and preschool to support working parents and to ensure that children start kindergarten ready to learn. During the first five years of life, children learn critical skills such as language and socio-emotional regulation, which provide a foundation for lifelong learning. High-quality preschool and child care can support healthy development and enable parents to work. Unfortunately, too many children are left behind by the status quo. In fact, differences in children’s cognitive abilities by income are evident at only 9 months old and significantly widen by the time children are age 2. Early learning has positive impacts for children, families, and the economy. It’s time to work to put these programs within reach.

District of Columbia families need access to high-quality child care and preschool

The District of Columbia has 44,126 children under age 6,73 percent of whom have all available parents in the workforce.

High-quality child care and preschool programs help narrow school readiness gaps, which is particularly important for children of color and those living in low-income families.

The cost of child care is out of reach for families

Annual costs at a child care center in the District of Columbia average $40,473 for an infant and a 4-year-old, which is 59 percent of the median income for families with children.

For low-income families and people of color, the average cost of child care would constitute the majority of income in most cases.

The current child care system is failing District of Columbia families

On average, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, or CCDBG, serves only 8 percent of federally eligible children in the District of Columbia. This results in only 1,200 District of Columbia children served through CCDBG funds. Of those served, 95 percent attend licensed or regulated center-based care.

74 percent of the District of Columbia’s children under age 5 are children of color.
District of Columbia families need greater access to high-quality preschool programs

The District of Columbia provides high-quality, universal preschool to 3- and 4-year-olds through the public preschool program. This preschool program meets 9 quality benchmarks set by the National Institute for Early Education Research and spends $17,509 annually per student.

In the District of Columbia, 78 percent of 3-year-olds and 100 percent of 4-year-olds are enrolled in a public preschool program.

Investing in high-quality early learning programs affects economies

Making child care more affordable for families can increase mothers’ workforce participation, resulting in a boost to the state’s economy.

In the District of Columbia, if child care costs did not exceed more than 10 percent of a family’s income, the state’s economy would increase nearly $19.16 million.

We can do better for District of Columbia families

The Center for American Progress proposes two solutions to put high-quality child care and preschool within reach for District of Columbia families and create an early childhood learning continuum for children:

• A new High-Quality Child Care Tax Credit would help families afford high-quality care for their children. This tax credit would benefit an estimated 8,900 children in the District of Columbia and save families an average of $18,748 per year on child care costs.

• Voluntary universal preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds. This would increase access for fewer than 100 children in the District of Columbia.

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*Correction, July 19, 2017: This fact sheet has been updated to clarify that the second pie chart refers to state-specific data.