Early Learning in North Carolina
By Jessica Troe    July 2016

North Carolina 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.

North Carolina families need access to high-quality child care and preschool
North Carolina has 684,393 children under age 6, 66 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 North Carolina average $16,847 for an infant and a 4-year-old, which is 32 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 North Carolina families
On average, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, or CCDBG, serves only 18 percent of federally eligible children in North Carolina. This results in only 65,600 North Carolina children served through CCDBG funds. Of those served, 87 percent attend licensed or regulated center-based care.

Children living in low-income families
- 54% share of children younger than age 6 living in low-income households

Race and ethnicity of children younger than age 5
- 51% White
- 23% African American
- 17% Latino
- 3% Asian
- 1% American Indian and Alaska Native
- <0.5% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander
- 5% Two or more races

49.5 percent of North Carolina’s children under age 5 are children of color.
North Carolina families need greater access to high-quality preschool programs

The North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program provides state-funded preschool education to at-risk 4-year-olds from low-income families. No 3-year-olds are served by state-funded preschool programs. This preschool program meets 10 quality benchmarks set by the National Institute for Early Education Research and spends $7,793 annually per student.

In North Carolina, 6 percent of 3-year-olds and 31 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 North Carolina, if child care costs did not exceed more than 10 percent of a family’s income, the state’s economy would increase nearly $71.35 million.

We can do better for North Carolina families

The Center for American Progress proposes two solutions to put high-quality child care and preschool within reach for North Carolina 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 186,900 children in North Carolina and save families an average of $5,907 per year on child care costs.

• Voluntary universal preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds. This would increase access for 195,000 children in North Carolina.

Jessica Troe is the Policy and Outreach Coordinator for the Early Childhood Policy team at the Center for American Progress.

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


16. Ibid.


18. Ibid.


