Early Learning in Nebraska

By Jessica Troe    July 2016

Nebraska 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.

Nebraska families need access to high-quality child care and preschool

Nebraska has 157,615 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 Nebraska average $14,769 for an infant and a 4-year-old, which is 23 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 Nebraska families

On average, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, or CCDBG, serves only 12 percent of federally eligible children in Nebraska. This results in only 11,400 Nebraska children served through CCDBG funds. Of those served, 68 percent attend licensed or regulated center-based care.

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Children living in low-income families

- Share of children younger than age 6 living in low-income households

Race and ethnicity of children younger than age 5

- 69% White
- 6% African American
- 18% Latino
- 2% Asian
- 1% American Indian and Alaska Native
- <0.5% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander
- 4% Two or more races

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

The Nebraska Early Childhood Education Grant Program provides preschool for children ages 3 to 5. At least 70 percent of grants must go to serving children with specific risk factors, such as eligibility for free or reduced-priced lunches, having teen parents, or living in a home in which English is not the primary language. This preschool program meets 7 quality benchmarks set by the National Institute for Early Education Research and spends $5,711 annually per student.

In Nebraska, 21 percent of 3-year-olds and 39 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 Nebraska, if child care costs did not exceed more than 10 percent of a family’s income, the state’s economy would increase nearly $7.71 million.

We can do better for Nebraska families

The Center for American Progress proposes two solutions to put high-quality child care and preschool within reach for Nebraska 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 39,400 children in Nebraska and save families an average of $5,900 per year on child care costs.

• Voluntary universal preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds. This would increase access for 36,400 children in Nebraska.

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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.