Early Learning in Rhode Island
By Jessica Troe  July 2016

Rhode Island 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.

Rhode Island families need access to high-quality child care and preschool
Rhode Island has 69,366 children under age 6, 72 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 Rhode Island average $22,907 for an infant and a 4-year-old, which is 37 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 Rhode Island families
On average, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, or CCDBG, serves only 12 percent of federally eligible children in Rhode Island. This results in only 5,700 Rhode Island children served through CCDBG funds. Of those served, 73 percent attend licensed or regulated center-based care.
Rhode Island families need greater access to high-quality preschool programs

The Rhode Island State Pre-Kindergarten Program is available to all 4-year-olds, but enrollment is determined by a lottery system. Head Start programs, private child care centers, and public schools can receive grants to distribute services. 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 $9,641 annually per student.

In Rhode Island, 9 percent of 3-year-olds and 14 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 Rhode Island, if child care costs did not exceed more than 10 percent of a family’s income, the state’s economy would increase nearly $8.32 million.

We can do better for Rhode Island families

The Center for American Progress proposes two solutions to put high-quality child care and preschool within reach for Rhode Island 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 18,700 children in Rhode Island and save families an average of $9,462 per year on child care costs.

• Voluntary universal preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds. This would increase access for 17,800 children in Rhode Island.

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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.


16 Ibid.


18 Ibid.


Endnotes