Early Learning in Wisconsin

By Jessica Troe    July 2016

Wisconsin 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.

Wisconsin families need access to high-quality child care and preschool
Wisconsin has 398,209 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 Wisconsin average $21,048 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 Wisconsin families
On average, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, or CCDBG, serves only 10 percent of federally eligible children in Wisconsin. This results in only 24,300 Wisconsin children served through CCDBG funds. Of those served, 83 percent attend licensed or regulated center-based care.
Wisconsin families need greater access to high-quality preschool programs
Wisconsin provides free, voluntary education for 4-year-olds, dependent on participation by the school district. Additionally, Wisconsin provides state funding that supplements the federal Head Start program to provide comprehensive early childhood education to 3- and 4-year-olds from low-income families and those with disabilities.15
This preschool program meets 5.1 quality benchmarks set by the National Institute for Early Education Research and spends $6,018 annually per student.

In Wisconsin, 12 percent of 3-year-olds and 71 percent of 4-year-olds are enrolled in a public preschool program.16

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.17

In Wisconsin, if child care costs did not exceed more than 10 percent of a family’s income, the state’s economy would increase nearly $40.93 million.18

We can do better for Wisconsin families
The Center for American Progress proposes two solutions to put high-quality child care and preschool within reach for Wisconsin 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 101,300 children in Wisconsin19 and save families an average of $8,142 per year on child care costs.20

• Voluntary universal preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds.21 This would increase access for 79,300 children in Wisconsin.22

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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.


17 Ibid.  

18 Ibid.


