Arkansas 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.

Arkansas families need access to high-quality child care and preschool
Arkansas has 193,274 children under age 6, 64 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. Thirty-six percent of Arkansas children under age 6 live in low-income families.

The supply of high-quality child care is limited. Many states have implemented quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) to assess and support quality in early care and education programs. Currently, 67 percent of Arkansas child care centers participate in QRIS.

The cost of child care is out of reach for families
Annual costs at a child care center in Arkansas average $11,131 for an infant and a 4-year-old, which is 22 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 Arkansas families

On average, the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) serves only 8 percent of federally eligible children in Arkansas. This results in only 7,400 Arkansas children served through CCDBG funds. Of those served, 94 percent attend licensed or regulated center-based care.

Arkansas families need greater access to high-quality preschool programs

The Arkansas Better Chance and Arkansas Better Chance for School Success programs are available for 3- and 4-year-olds from low-income families. Children ages 0 to 5 from low-income families or with other risk issues such as developmental delay, being in foster care, or low parental education levels also could be eligible for early education services. Preschool is offered through Head Start, service cooperatives, public schools, private businesses, and nonprofit organizations. This preschool program meets, on average, 9 quality benchmarks set by the National Institute for Early Education Research and spends $7,773 annually per student.

In Arkansas, 28 percent of 3-year-olds and 42 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 Arkansas, if child care costs did not exceed more than 10 percent of a family’s income, the state’s economy would increase nearly $9.54 million.

We can do better for Arkansas families

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

• If child care costs are capped at 10 percent of a family’s income, Arkansas families would save $1,044 a year.
• Voluntary universal preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds. This would increase access for 37,300 children in Arkansas.
Endnotes


8 Note: IL, NH, and OK require participation in QRIS or it’s required by licensing standards, and therefore participation is listed as 100 percent. FL has three regional QRIS with available data: MD is Miami-Dade County, PB is Palm Beach County, and D is Duval County.


11 Author’s analysis based on data from Child Care Aware of America, “Parents and the High Cost of Child Care” and the 2015 median income as measured by Kids Count Data Center. See Kids Count Data Center, “Median Family Income Among Households With Children” (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2013), available at https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-learning/report/2013/02/07/96901/the-middle-class-squeeze/.


18 Ibid.

19 Note: In states that do not serve 3-year-olds or with no state-funded preschool program, enrollment rates include federal Head Start only.


22 Ibid.

23 Author’s analysis based on data from Child Care Aware of America, “Parents and the High Cost of Child Care” and the 2015 U.S. median income as measured by Kids Count Data Center. See Kids Count Data Center, “Median Family Income Among Households With Children.”
