Early Learning in the District of Columbia: 2017

July 2017

District of Columbia 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.

District of Columbia families need access to high-quality child care and preschool

The District of Columbia has 49,741 children under age 6, 74 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-eight percent of District of Columbia 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, but participation rates across the United States are low, and very few programs have been awarded the highest-quality ratings.

The cost of child care is out of reach for families

Annual costs at a child care center in the District of Columbia average $40,521 for an infant and a 4-year-old, which is 51 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race and ethnicity of children younger than age 5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
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<tr>
<td>American Indian and Alaska Native</td>
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<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander</td>
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<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
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</tbody>
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73 percent of District of Columbia’s children under age 5 are children of color.
The current child care system is failing District of Columbia families
On average, the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) serves only 8 percent of federally eligible children in the District of Columbia.\textsuperscript{13} This results in only 1,500 District of Columbia children served through CCDBG funds.\textsuperscript{14} Of those served, 95 percent attend licensed or regulated center-based care.\textsuperscript{15}

District of Columbia families need greater access to high-quality preschool programs
The District of Columbia provides high-quality, universal preschool to 3- and 4-year-olds through the public preschool program.\textsuperscript{16} This preschool program meets, on average, 4 quality benchmarks set by the National Institute for Early Education Research and spends $17,875 annually per student.\textsuperscript{17}

In the District of Columbia, 70 percent\textsuperscript{18} of 3-year-olds and 81 percent of 4-year-olds are enrolled in a public preschool program.\textsuperscript{19}

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.\textsuperscript{20}

In the District of Columbia, if child care costs did not exceed more than 10 percent of a family’s income, the state’s economy would increase nearly $19.16 million.\textsuperscript{21}

We can do better for District of Columbia families
The Center for American Progress proposes two solutions to put high-quality child care and preschool within reach for District of Columbia families and create an early childhood learning continuum for children:

\begin{itemize}
  \item If child care costs are capped at 10 percent of a family’s income, District of Columbia families would save $14,688 a year.\textsuperscript{22}
  \item Voluntary universal preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds.\textsuperscript{23} This would increase access for 3,600 children in the District of Columbia.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{itemize}


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

Ibid.

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


Ibid.

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.”
