New Jersey 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.

New Jersey has 640,027 children under age 6, 67 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 New Jersey 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, 20 percent of New Jersey 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 New Jersey average $21,105 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 New Jersey families

On average, the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) serves only 10 percent of federally eligible children in New Jersey. This results in only 48,000 New Jersey children served through CCDBG funds. Of those served, 90 percent attend licensed or regulated center-based care.

New Jersey families need greater access to high-quality preschool programs

The state of New Jersey funds preschool through three separate programs: Abbott Preschool Program, which provides funding to eligible districts’ 3- and 4-year-olds; Non-Abbott Early Childhood Program Aid, which only serves children who meet specific criteria; and the Early Launch to Learning Initiative, established to provide access to high-quality preschool education for all 4-year-olds. This preschool program meets, on average, 8.8 quality benchmarks set by the National Institute for Early Education Research and spends $12,664 annually per student.

In New Jersey, 23 percent of 3-year-olds and 33 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 New Jersey, if child care costs did not exceed more than 10 percent of a family’s income, the state’s economy would increase nearly $39.68 million.

We can do better for New Jersey families

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

- If child care costs are capped at 10 percent of a family’s income, New Jersey families would save $2,518 a year.
- Voluntary universal preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds. This would increase access for 163,300 children in New Jersey.


7 Author’s calculations based on state preschool and federal Head Start data. In states that do not serve 3-year-olds or with no preschool program, enrollment rates include federal Head Start only.

8 Ibid.

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