

Early Childhood Educators Set Florida Kids on the Path to Success

A highly-qualified, well-compensated teaching staff is key to quality early care and education



Acknowledgements

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Supported by tax-deductible contributions from foundations, individuals, and corporations.

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January 2023

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cannot qualify for
military service**

Summary

Quality early care and education (ECE) can strengthen Florida's current and future workforce, contribute to a strong state economy and public safety, and enhance national security. Increasing investments in Florida's early education system will help it better meet the needs of children, families, and educators. When families do not have the child care they need, parents' work productivity falls, resulting in costs to parents, their employers, and taxpayers. Lack of access to preschool places children from families with low incomes at risk of starting school already behind their more advantaged peers. Inadequate compensation and subpar working conditions for educators results in high levels of turnover, impacting the quality of programs.

There are other consequences as well. Florida jails are full of people convicted of

serious and costly crimes. It doesn't have to be that way. Providing at-risk children with high-quality ECE opportunities can help reduce the human and fiscal costs of crime in the future by setting children up for success in school and beyond. Further, our national security relies on qualified young adults who are ready, willing, and able to serve in the U.S. military. However, educational deficits, health issues, and other problems (substance misuse and crime) prevent 72 percent of Florida youth from qualifying for service.¹ Healthy early development sets the stage for children's future success. Without improvements to the ECE system, our nation risks having an even smaller military recruiting pool in the future.

Florida policymakers must continue to grow access to quality early learning programs.

A fundamental feature of ECE quality is highly-qualified teachers who are well-



Most Florida parents are in the workforce and need ECE

More than two thirds (68 percent) of Florida children under age 6 have all parents in the workforce.² Thus, many very young children are in child care or preschool while their parents are working to support their families. These ECE settings are a key environment for children, particularly given the importance of the early years for brain development.

However, the ECE system does not meet the needs of many Florida families or employers. More than one third (38 percent) of Floridians live in a child care “desert,” where there are at least three children for every licensed child care slot.³ Florida’s School Readiness program provides educational child care for parents who work or go to school.⁴ However, many needy families do not qualify for the program and reimbursement rates must be increased to recruit and retain qualified educators.

In 2021, 66 percent of Florida 4-year-olds participated in the state’s Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) program or Head Start; VPK does not serve 3-year-olds.⁵ VPK has experienced challenges around quality, meeting just two of the 10 quality benchmarks set by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), falling short on teacher education, training, and professional development. Only about half of entering Florida kindergartners demonstrate readiness to succeed in school.⁶

Child care, particularly for infants and toddlers, is unaffordable for many families: the cost of infant care in a center in Florida

trained both before and during their service and who need to be adequately compensated. Quite simply, to hire the best talent requires adequate investment.

Florida policymakers must address the needs of the ECE workforce to ensure that families have the programs they need, parents can work, and children can be set on the path to success. In particular, Florida’s ECE workforce solutions must include meaningful preparation, ongoing professional development, and sufficient compensation. Action and innovation now can improve the experiences of Florida children today and strengthen our state in the years to come.



Bolstering the early childhood workforce is essential to increasing quality child care opportunities, strengthening our economy, and developing our future workforce.”



Alfred Sanchez
President & CEO,
Greater Miami
Chamber of Commerce

averages \$10,774 per year, substantially more than the \$6,366 cost for in-state public college tuition.⁷ Infant care costs 12 percent of the median income of a married couple in Florida, while “affordable” care is defined as costing no more than seven percent of family income.⁸

Beyond the negative effects on children and families, problems with child care inflict a huge economic toll. Our 2019 ReadyNation national study of working parents of children under age 3 found that, when families do not have the child care they need, parents’ work productivity falls, resulting in costs to parents, their employers, and taxpayers.⁹ These child care challenges exact an annual cost of \$57 billion in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue, nationwide, and an estimated \$2.9 billion per year for Florida.¹⁰ As this study focused just on infants and toddlers, it severely

underestimated the economic impact of shortcomings in the overall ECE system.

Research shows that high-quality ECE supports children’s development

Studies have shown the benefits of high-quality ECE. For example, a longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in higher-quality child care were better-prepared for school at age 4 than children in lower-quality child care. At age 15, they were still performing slightly above their peers and also experienced significantly lower levels of behavior problems.¹¹ By age 26, participants from families with low incomes who spent two or more years in high-quality child care were more likely to graduate from college and had higher salaries.¹²

Decades of research, across numerous states, show the short- and long-term benefits of high-quality preschool for children’s development, particularly for children from families with low incomes.¹³ Children who attend high-quality preschool are more likely to arrive at kindergarten ready to learn, with enhanced early math, language, and literacy skills.¹⁴ They are also less likely to be held back in school or to need special education,¹⁵ and more likely to be proficient in reading and math.¹⁶ Preschool participants also have an increased probability of graduating from high school.¹⁷ Students who participate in high-quality preschool are less likely to have behavioral infractions in elementary and middle school and to be suspended from high school, demonstrating the impact of ECE on behavior.¹⁸



A smaller, but significant, number of long-term studies directly examine the link between preschool participation and crime prevention. An MIT study of the Boston preschool program found that enrollees were less likely to have been incarcerated in a juvenile facility during high school, compared to non-enrollees.¹⁹ Children not served by the Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPC) early education program were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18.²⁰ By age 24, the people served by the CPC were 20 percent less likely to have served time in jail or prison.²¹

In sum, ECE programs can set children on a path to successful adulthood. However, ECE must be high-quality in order to help children develop critical skills needed for

success in school and life. **Among the most fundamental of these quality features are highly-qualified teachers.**

Teachers are the foundation of high-quality early care and education

The heart of any ECE program is the relationship between the teacher and the children.²² Research indicates that a well-qualified workforce is an essential, fundamental component of high-quality ECE. One study found that the teacher-child relationship was the aspect of preschool quality most closely linked to child learning outcomes.²³ Highly-qualified teachers engage in warm, nurturing interactions with the children to support their development in all areas. Excellent teachers also provide developmentally-

“ I believe there has never been a more crucial time in the history of America than there is today, for every citizen to invest in improved outcomes for children.”



Sheriff Walter McNeil,
Leon County

appropriate instruction in key early literacy, math and other academic skills.²⁴ To offer this high-quality experience, early childhood educators must be well-trained, both before they start teaching and once they are on the job through ongoing professional development.²⁵ Adequate compensation is key to attracting and retaining top talent.²⁶ Retaining teachers is particularly important for young children, since positive, stable relationships support healthy development.

Key elements of a highly-qualified early care and education workforce

Education: The level of education required for ECE teachers has been a matter of long-standing debate. Much research, including a comprehensive review of 48 studies by the Campbell Collaboration, has found that higher teacher education levels

have a strong relationship to higher quality in ECE.²⁷

Professional development: Studies show that effective professional development is:

- Classroom-focused: related to what teachers are actually teaching;
- Active: allows for hands-on practice of skills;
- Collaborative: with modeling and/or coaching of skills and feedback provided.²⁸

However, providers face barriers to participating in professional development, including long work hours and low compensation.²⁹ Further, investments in professional development can be lost when teachers leave their jobs, often due to inadequate compensation.³⁰

Compensation: Adequate compensation is required to attract and retain a high-quality ECE workforce.³¹ But ECE teachers typically earn substantially less than other teachers. In Florida, the annual mean wage for child care teachers is \$27,560, and for prekindergarten teachers is \$29,890, compared to \$59,040 for kindergarten teachers.³²

The path forward for Florida

Bolstering the early childhood workforce is an essential aspect of increasing ECE supply and children’s access. Florida policymakers must address each of the key elements of ECE workforce quality in a comprehensive strategy, because the elements are interrelated. For example, if compensation remains low, teachers will have neither the means nor the incentive to pursue intensive professional development. Similarly, the type and amount of professional

development required will vary depending on the level and quality of teacher pre-service education. Increasing reimbursement rates in the School Readiness program is one way to ensure owners and operators of early learning programs have the resources they need to address compensation and increase educator recruitment and retention.

Florida has such a comprehensive approach, the Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) Early Childhood Scholarship Program.³³ T.E.A.C.H. provides scholarships to two- and four-year degree programs in early childhood education. Upon completion, participants receive a raise or bonus from their employers. Policymakers must continue to invest in T.E.A.C.H. and additional strategies to ensure that all early educators receive the training, support, and professional compensation they need to provide high-quality early learning experiences for children.

“ For national security, our military needs leaders who are disciplined, are literate, and who spend time learning and growing every day. Those very qualities are developed in early childhood education programs.”



**Lt. General (Ret.)
Mark P. Hertling,**
U.S. Army, Orlando

Conclusion

High-quality ECE is a powerful means of supporting children’s development while their parents work. However, this potential will only be fully realized when children can attend quality programs with a highly-qualified ECE workforce with meaningful education, ongoing professional development, and sufficient compensation. Support for high-quality ECE is an investment in our future public safety, national security, and economic well-being.

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