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THE IMPORTANCE OF HIGH QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION FOR THE FUTURE OF DELAWARE'S CHILDREN AND FAMILIES



Rena Hallam

Associate Professor, Human Development and Family Sciences, University of Delaware
Associate Director, Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood

Martha Buell

Professor, Human Development and Family Sciences, University of Delaware
Director, Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood

Heidi Beck

Director, New Directions Early Head Start

This policy brief describes the importance of providing high quality early care and education programs for young children and their families. The need for early childhood services in Delaware is discussed relative to the array of early childhood care and education programs offered. The University of Delaware's statewide efforts to improve the access and quality of early care and education programs for all families are presented. The brief concludes with suggestions for policy initiatives that can further support this work.

The Importance of the First Five Years of Life

The first five years of a child's life are a uniquely important period of learning and development. Throughout this time, young children develop the foundational skills necessary to be academically and socially successful in school and beyond. Research shows that during this time of rapid growth, children's development is greatly influenced by their environment and the interactions they have with their caregivers (National Research Council, 2000). In fact, babies' early experiences actually shape the architecture of their brains. Responsive care and enriching interactions between very young children and their caregivers helps to build a solid foundation for learning and development (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007). Simple daily interactions and routines during the infant and toddler period are important opportunities for caregivers and parents to communicate with children. Most importantly caregivers must be in tune with babies

and respond to their physical and emotional needs with care and sensitivity. Through responsive high quality care, babies develop the foundations of emotional regulation. Language enriched activities such as exploring books, singing songs and hearing descriptions of the world around them are essential to building communication, language, and cognitive skills that serve as the foundation for later learning. As children grow into preschoolers, they develop vital skills in literacy, motor development, and social relationships.

However, young children who do not receive high quality caregiving during the first years of life fall behind those that do. Young children who face challenges, such as the chaotic home environments caused by poverty, abuse and neglect, or other types of trauma are negatively impacted by these experiences and as such these negative experiences can influence all aspects of learning and development, including problem solving ability, language learning and social skills (National Research Council, 2000). For instance, young children growing up in poverty may

have language delays attributable to the *word gap*: The difference in the number of words a child living in poverty hears compared to child from an affluent family. The word gap ranges from 4 million to 30 million words by the time a child reaches kindergarten (Sperry, Sperry & Miller, 2018).

Early care and education programs offer an opportunity to intervene and support all children, and particularly those most at-risk of later difficulties in school and social relationships. Research shows that high quality early childhood education can serve as a buffer for those young children in the most challenging situations (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007). And while some states have focused on expanding opportunities for Pre-K services, Noble Prize winning economist David Heckman's research indicates that there is a 13% return on investment for high quality birth to five programs, versus a 7-10% return on preschool programming alone (<https://heckmanequation.org/>). Thus, attention to the provision of high quality early care and education for young children from birth through five years of age has the most potential for impacting the learning and development of young children.

The State of Early Care and Education in Delaware

Every day in Delaware, families rely on early childhood programs to care for their children while they work. Because programming for children birth to five and in afterschool programs has been traditionally seen as a workforce support for families, the Office of Child Care Licensing has traditionally focused on the health and safety dimensions of early care and education programs. However, high quality early care and education programs support the development and learning of young children while allowing parents to work. It is estimated that approximately 45,000 young children across the state have working parents and need some type of non-parental child care (Child Care Aware, 2017). To meet this need, families can choose different types of programs including licensed family child care, center-based programs, and in some locales public schools provide early childhood services. Research suggests that all of these types of care can provide children with the important, positive developmental experiences that children need during the early childhood period, as long as the programs are of high quality. Prior research has noted that the quality of early childhood programs in the state varies and not all children have access to high quality care (Karoly, Schwartz, Setodj, & Haas, 2016; Gamel-McCormick, Buell, Amsden, & Fahey, 2006). In recent years, Delaware has made significant investments in developing a statewide system of supports to assist early childhood programs

in improving the early care and education services provided to young children and their families. However, while the investments have increased, the requirements for the professional development of the early care and education workforce have remained the same. The Office of Child Care Licensing's Delacare regulations require the completion of only 120 clock hours of training to be able to supervise children in a child care center, dramatically less than is recommended. According to the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and the National Research Council's (NRC) report *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (2015), calls for all professionals working with children from birth to age 8 to have at least a Bachelor's degree. While the need for a well-educated early care and education workforce is well established, how to align compensation with education remains a primary barrier. Across the state, the early care and education workforce earns an average \$11.60 an hour.

University of Delaware's Contributions - Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood and the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences

The University of Delaware (UD) serves as a key state partner in bolstering the quality of the early care and education throughout the entire state. UD's contributions include direct service delivery, education and training of early care and education providers and other members of the early care and education workforce, and on-site technical assistance and coaching to early childhood programs. A description of the services and supports offered through the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, and its subsidiary the Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood is presented below.

The University of Delaware's early childhood education major is situated in the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences. Students in this program are eligible to be endorsed by the state's Department of Education for a blended teacher license in early childhood (serving children from birth to through second grade), and early childhood special education. In this dynamic teacher education program, undergraduate students learn to design developmentally appropriate curriculum for young children based on current research and effectively engage with diverse populations of children and families. In the past five years, an average of 150 students have completed this teacher certification program.



Housed within the department of Human Development and Family Sciences is the Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood (DIEEC). The DIEEC was created by a state contract awarded to the University of Delaware in 2008. As part of DIEEC, key state supports have been developed to improve the quality of early care and education services delivered to Delaware's young children and families, including New Directions Early Head Start, the Delaware Stars for Early Success, and the DIEEC Professional Development Unit.

New Directions Early Head Start (NDEHS) is a federally funded Early Head Start program empowering and supporting low income pregnant women, infants and toddlers, and their families. NDEHS supports children's emotional, physical and cognitive development, and involves parents as the child's first teacher in high quality infant and toddler settings. This is accomplished through a consortium of early care and education partners. The NDEHS consortium of agencies represents an innovative collaborative model bringing together the university with a diverse group of non-profit community agencies to provide high quality direct services to 195 children and families in New Castle and Kent Counties. The consortium also works to have an impact on many more families and service providers by way of its capacity-building approach in the areas of childcare, disability support, professional development, and coordination of services.

Delaware Stars for Early Success is a statewide system designed to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early care and education settings. Funded by the Delaware Department of Education, Delaware Stars develops quality standards for all types of early childhood programs and provides support to programs to meet these higher standards. Currently, approximately 75% of early childhood centers and 23% of licensed family child care homes participate in Delaware Stars. Early childhood programs that participate in Delaware Stars receive on-site support in areas such as family engagement, early childhood curriculum, and administrative practices.

DIEEC PD Unit provides the state infrastructure to offer and track training for members of the early care and education workforce. Trainings are offered at the request of the Office of Early Learning both by the DIEEC PD team and state partnering agencies such as Prevent Child Abuse Delaware and the Delaware Association for the Education of Young Children. Partner agencies and entrepreneurial trainers can have their training content quality assured. Through the PD registry system members of the workforce can register and keep track of their training hours. During fiscal year 2017 DIEEC PD offered 490 trainings, resulting in over 2000 hours of training to the ECE workforce.

Policy Recommendations

The early care and education system in Delaware has experienced significant positive growth over the past decade. In order to continue to build on this momentum, we offer three key policy recommendations:

Capitalize on recent investments to expand effective quality improvement efforts. Delaware has built a statewide system of delivering quality improvement supports through efforts at the DIEEC. These efforts can be extended and strengthened by developing targeted priorities, which will focus and clarify important programmatic services. Possible focal areas include enhancing children's social-emotional development, strengthening program administration practices, and developing protocols for use when children experience trauma or loss. Intentional efforts such as these offer the possibility of increasing the state's capacity to meet the needs of our most vulnerable children while also promoting quality programming for all.

Create infrastructure to support cross-sector, sustainable early childhood partnerships. Similar to most states, Delaware has a complex delivery of early care and education services that includes partnerships among many different types of programs. Early care and education policies are found in three state agencies – the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Services

for Children, Youth and Their Families, and the Department of Education. Likewise financing of early childhood relies on funding from multiple sources. This diversity is both a strength and a challenge. In moving forward, it is important to ensure that effective systems are designed to promote collaboration and resource sharing across the different interagency types and funding sources. The development of a shared governance structure across the different units that provide early childhood services would enable clear statewide systems for communication, interagency collaboration, and resource coordination which are needed to support program quality. Further, such a structure has the potential to increase collaboration between local public schools and community-based early childhood programs as well as expand innovative programs like Early Head Start and child care partnerships models.

Increase the Educational Requirements of the Early Care and Education Workforce through Support for Wage Parity. To work with young children, teachers and caregivers need preparation and professional development to design and implement learning opportunities for young children. Although Delaware has strong K-12 teacher preparation programs, more needs to be done to effectively support current early care and education personnel who work in non-school based programs, such as community based child

care, family child care and before and after school programs. Professional development opportunities that are focused on credit-bearing credentials embedded within degree programs leading to an AA or BA will establish an educational pathway for early care and education personnel. Efforts to promote early care and education professionals in attaining higher credentials should be aligned with complimentary initiatives to raise their wages. The state already invests in programs like the Teacher Education And Compensation Helps early Childhood (T.E.A.C.H®) and the Child Care WAGES that link education and compensation. Increased access and funding for these programs will leverage and strengthen the professional development pipeline.

Conclusion

Delaware has made significant strides in creating systems to support early care and education for our state's children and families. Creating policies designed to integrate and elevate this work can leverage these investments. According to the Nobel prize winning economist David Heckman, for every dollar that is invested in early childhood programming there is a \$7 return. Investments we make today pay off in the educational and productivity gains of our children and families tomorrow.

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Learn more about PPE!

ppe-info@udel.edu | 302-831-0184

182 Graham Hall, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19716
www.sites.udel.edu/ppe/

The Partnership for Public Education (PPE) is inspired by a vision of excellence and equity in public education for all Delaware children and families.

Our work is grounded in the belief that research, practice, family, and community are all needed in the systematic improvement of educational opportunities and outcomes. This goal can only be achieved through collaboration and cooperation.

The mission of PPE is to unite members of the University of Delaware and the broader education community, including schools, families, and community organizations, to identify and address shared needs and opportunities.

**Together, we can strengthen public
education for all Delaware children.**