

## **How Are the Children? Maine's economy depends on our youngest children!**

Written by Mary Ellin Logue and Sandra Phoenix

Recently, we asked Haley McDonald, long time Deer Isle childcare owner and teacher, how she would 'fix' the childcare crisis in this country. "Childcare should be federally subsidized. The employees are not getting paid a reasonable wage to make this their career, it just feels like a stopping point for most of them. If this career was treated like a profession, like public school teaching, we would have more dedicated staff and less turn-over. Centers cannot charge enough to pay employees adequately, but if there was a partial subsidy from the government, centers could make up the difference with parent fees."

Over 60 years of research show that investment in quality childcare and PreK has strong economic benefits for society, including: improved health outcomes for children into adulthood; higher high school graduation rates; higher lifelong earnings; decreased risky behaviors and arrests; and, lower rates of special education. Yet, in Maine, only 3.3% of children from birth to 3 years receive early intervention services, only 35% of four-year-olds have access to public preschool, while 20% of children ages 3–21 years receive special education services. Every child deserves help, but are we spending our tax dollars where our children will receive the greatest benefit?

It may seem counterintuitive, but the earlier the investment, the greater the return. If all three-and-four-year-old children attended preschool, the ROI or "return on investment" would be 7–10 % nationally— 7.5 % in Maine. When investment begins with services to pregnant mothers and includes quality childcare, the ROI jumps to 13%. These figures are based on the decrease in the need and costs of special education, remedial education, and incarceration, and the increase in workforce productivity and taxes paid by parents who can work to their full potential.

Why is quality childcare so important to children, families, and our economy? Sixty-eight percent of Maine children under age six have all parents in the workforce, meaning that young children regularly spend time in the care of someone other than their parents. Simple interactions between caregivers and young children, like changing a diaper, typically include eye contact, smiling, 'serve-and-return conversations', and toys or items that engage the child's senses. These interactions not only meet the child's physical care needs, but stimulate parts of the brain responsible for language, social-emotional functioning, and visual and tactile development. Every adult who provides direct care to children, on some level, is a teacher.

In the US, there are no federal policies that provide infrastructure or consistent investment in childcare, although some states are beginning to step up. This leaves the responsibility of finding quality childcare centers, and paying for care, squarely on the shoulders of the parents. What's the situation in Maine?

- The cost of quality childcare is too expensive for most families—\$9,000–14,000 is the average yearly cost of care for one infant, similar to the University of Maine in-state tuition, and some working families may pay up to 20% of their income on childcare.
- Lower income families may be eligible for subsidies or free childcare, but available slots in quality programs, like Early Head Start, may be difficult to access, especially in rural areas.
- Infant and toddler care is more expensive to provide because of mandatory teacher/child ratios, so many facilities do not offer it.
- More than a third of licensed childcare facilities and 600 home-based childcare centers have closed in the past 10 years.
- A lack of affordable, quality early care, as well as after-school and summer care, particularly in our rural areas, often stops parents from fully participating in the workforce or further education, especially women who shoulder most of the care for their children.

What kind of infrastructure and investment is needed to create stable, affordable, and accessible quality childcare?

- Build a professional class of early childhood teachers with specialized education and degree programs, and resources to help working teachers achieve their goals over time.
- Pay early childhood teachers on the same scale and with basic benefits that public school teachers enjoy. The average annual salary of private childcare teachers in Maine is \$26,000, not enough for them to financially care for their families. Many owners of childcare homes or centers in our state can't charge parents enough to cover the true cost of care, especially for infants, or to recruit and keep new teachers.
- Lower rates of interest on student loans or offer student loan forgiveness to help teachers consider a profession in early childhood or stay in the profession, ensuring a stable teaching workforce.
- Develop a fair way of subsidizing childcare costs based on family income so everyone who needs childcare will be able to afford care and continue to be productive in their workplace.

Although public and private investment in childcare has an upfront cost to families, school districts, employers, communities, and the state, in the long term, all come out ahead. Across the political spectrum, 60–80% of Americans support public investment in childcare. Although the recently passed COVID relief bill will help families with subsidies that can be used to pay for childcare and other family necessities, that funding will not be available until summer, and is a temporary fix, not a long-term solution.

How can we help? Encourage our state legislators to invest in childcare infrastructure—increases in pay and benefits for early childhood teachers, funding for specialized early childhood education programs, subsidized childcare based on income. These investments can help stabilize childcare services in our state and help to boost short and long-term economic growth, increase families' earnings, and promote financial security. Quality, affordable, and accessible childcare and early education is a community issue—everybody depends upon someone who depends on childcare.

Resources for you:

- Council for a Strong America video from 2020 about the importance of childcare for Maine's children and our economy <https://youtu.be/fkbGVHhY9MQ> and their report <https://www.strongnation.org/articles/1424-early-childhood-programs-scarcity-undermines-maine-s-rural-communities>
- Philip Trostel, The Fiscal Payoff of Investment in Early Childhood Development in Maine <https://www.educarecentralmaine.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Trostel-Report.pdf>
- NPR 2019 4-part series on childcare challenges in Maine <http://projects.mainepublic.org/child-care-deep-dive>

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