

## OP-ED: The Benefits of Early Childhood Education

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Last week, thousands of children, early care teachers, providers, parents and community members from across the country celebrated the Week of the Young Child, an annual event of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. In Connecticut, hundreds of young children and the communities that support them also participated. The theme in Connecticut: “Early Years are Learning Years-Children Soar with High Quality Early Education!”

As a society, we are beginning to understand the benefits of investing early and wisely in our young children. Early childhood is a time of tremendous growth with 80 – 85 percent of brain development occurring by age 3. Research shows that high-quality early childhood programs help children – especially those from families with low-incomes – develop the skills they need to succeed in school. Children immersed in high-quality early learning experiences have many long-term benefits including school achievement, reduced need for remedial and special education services, grade retention, and greater social adjustment.

Investment in high-quality early education is also good economics. Research by Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman indicates that one of the most effective strategies for improving educational outcomes and promoting economic development is high quality early education. For every dollar spent on high-quality early education, the Federal Reserve Board of Minnesota estimates a return of up to \$16 per dollar invested. Investment in human capital helps produce more literate, educated and employable workers who earn higher salaries and generate greater tax revenues. Employers understand that quality early education programs for employees produce short-term economic gains by reducing employee turnover, lowering absenteeism, and increasing worker productivity.

So, how are we doing in Connecticut to help children soar?

Ten percent of Connecticut’s workforce utilizes regulated early childhood programs, enabling 160,000 adults to contribute to Connecticut’s economy, and the industry itself directly employs 15,000 people. Eighty-percent of childcare services are financed through parent fees, demonstrating the economic force of the early care industry.

Despite the documented benefits of strong, comprehensive early learning opportunities for all children, Connecticut continues to face many challenges in achieving this goal. Recent statistics for towns such as Darien and Greenwich show roughly 90 percent of children enter the kindergarten door having a preschool experience. In Hartford and New Haven, that number falls to 65 percent. Children

do not begin learning when they turn 5 and enter kindergarten, thus our commitment to them cannot begin with kindergarten. Every child needs to have access to high-quality early childhood experience, especially those most at risk.

There are over 400,000 young children ages 0-8 in Connecticut. There was a recent assessment completed of a cohort of 41,606 children born in 2006 that reveal some alarming realities for our young children. Thirty-eight percent were born to mothers with less than a high school degree (15,917); 53 percent were served by federal/state nutritional supplement program – WIC (21,937); 34 percent were enrolled in HUSKY (14,121); and 12 percent had at least one DCF referral (5,097). Connecticut's current investment in early childhood initiatives that can help address some of these challenges is miniscule, with only 5percent of the state budget going toward early care initiatives.

What can Connecticut do to ensure all our children soar?

Continue to invest in high-quality early childhood programs and ensure all children have access to high quality experiences. By doing so, we will begin to shift our focus to preventing the achievement gap, rather than closing it.

We need to support parents in their role as a child's first teacher. All parents want to ensure their children have a safe, nurturing and stimulating environment at home or at a high-quality early childhood program. We need to support our local communities in their work to create effective strategies for early childhood that identifies needs, reaches out to parents, and provides a smooth transition to kindergarten. Our public leaders – legislative and executive – need to prioritize services and the funds that ensure the safety, health and educational development of Connecticut's young children.

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