

Early Childhood Educators Set Illinois Kids on the Path to Success

A highly-qualified, well-compensated workforce is key to quality early care & education programs



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Summary

Quality early care and education (ECE) can strengthen Illinois' current and future workforce, contribute to a strong state economy and public safety, and enhance national security. Voluntary, evidence-based home-visiting programs provide vital support for vulnerable families and can help reduce costly future problems, including child abuse, obesity, and lack of school readiness. Unfortunately, Illinois' current early childhood system does not fully meet the needs of children, families or program staff, with resulting consequences. When families do not have the child care they need, parents' work productivity falls, resulting in costs to parents, their employers, and, ultimately, taxpayers.

Lack of access to preschool places children — particularly, those from families with low incomes — at risk of starting school already

behind their more advantaged peers. In fall 2021, only about three out of 10 Illinois kindergarteners were starting school fully prepared for success, according to one key readiness measure; the figures were even more stark among low-income children and many kids of color.¹

When vulnerable families don't receive home-visiting services, they are not connected to vital supports that their infants and toddlers need to thrive. Inadequate compensation and subpar working conditions for early childhood program staff result in high levels of turnover, impacting the quality of and access to programs.

There are other consequences as well. Illinois 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. The association between child abuse and crime is significant, and home-visiting programs provide a solution to help combat child maltreatment. 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 (including obesity), and other problems (substance use and crime) prevent 77 percent of American youth from qualifying for service² (2020 data for youth in Illinois is forthcoming; in 2017, the figure was 70 percent).³ Healthy early development sets the stage for children's future success. Without improvements to the early childhood system, our nation risks having an even smaller military recruiting pool in the future.

As our state recovers from the wide-ranging effects of a debilitating, global pandemic,

policymakers must continue to grow access to quality early childhood programs that had lost important ground. **A fundamental feature of early childhood program quality is highly-qualified staff who are well-trained both before and during their service and who are adequately supported and compensated.** Illinois policymakers must address the needs of the early childhood workforce to ensure that families have the programs they need, parents can return to their jobs, and children can be set on the path to success.

This is especially important if we hope to achieve the goals of an expert, bipartisan commission that in 2021 issued well-researched and greatly needed recommendations for bolstering Illinois' system of early childhood programs. In particular, Illinois' early childhood workforce solutions must include increased access to competency-based education, training, and professional development, as well as increased compensation commensurate with the levels of training achieved. To achieve these goals, funding for early childhood programs must be increased, across the board. Action and innovation now can improve the experiences of Illinois children today and strengthen our state in the years to come.

More Illinois families could benefit from early childhood programs

In Illinois, there are approximately 881,000 children under age 6, and 70 percent of these children have all available parents in the workforce.⁴ As a result, 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,

“Success in hiring and retention across all sectors depends on child care. Early childhood educators are the ‘workforce behind the workforce’ and must be supported.”



Teresa Katubig
President & CEO,
HireLevel, Marion

particularly given the importance of the early years for brain development.

Even prior to the pandemic, Illinois’ early childhood system did not meet the needs of parents, children, employers, or program staff. More than half (58 percent) of Illinois residents lived in a child care desert, an area in which there are at least three times as many children as licensed child care slots.⁵ Availability is especially limited for families who live in rural areas, have infants and toddlers, or work evening and night shifts.⁶ The number of family child care providers in Illinois dropped 25.5 percent since 2010.⁷ Looking at Illinois state preschool and Head Start, combined, in 2021, only 23 percent of 3-year-olds and 33 percent of 4-year-olds were served.⁸ In all, the state’s Early Childhood Funding Commission found that only about half of Illinois children from low-income families are receiving the early care and education services that could benefit them.⁹

Child care, particularly for infants and toddlers, is unaffordable for many families. The cost of infant care in an Illinois center averages \$15,600 per year, more expensive than in-state public college tuition (\$14,667).¹⁰

Beyond the negative effects on children and families, problems with child care inflict a huge economic toll. Our new ReadyNation national study of working parents of children under age 3 found that, when families lack the child care they need, parents’ work productivity falls, resulting in costs to parents, their employers, and, ultimately, taxpayers.¹¹ These child care challenges exact an annual cost of \$122 billion in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue. The estimate for Illinois is \$4.9 billion per year in economic losses due to the child care crisis. As this study focused just on infant and toddler care, it severely underestimated the economic impact of shortcomings in the overall ECE system.

Of approximately 688,900 Illinois families with young children, there are over 124,000 highest-priority families who could benefit from home visiting programs.¹² However, due to limited funding, only 14,654 Illinois families (equivalent to about 12 percent of the highest priority families) received home-visiting services in FY 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated challenges in Illinois’ early childhood system. Early in the pandemic, many Illinois child providers closed at least temporarily; caseloads are still struggling to rebound.¹³ Many state preschool programs also closed temporarily and some shifted children to online learning.¹⁴ Similarly, Illinois home-visiting services also shifted to virtual platforms during the pandemic.¹⁵

Research shows: High-quality early childhood programs support children's cognitive, social, and emotional development

Studies have shown the benefits of high-quality ECE for children. 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, compared with children in lower-quality child care.¹⁶ 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, compared with those who had been in lower-quality care.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ Children who attend high-quality preschool are more likely to arrive at kindergarten ready to learn, with enhanced early math, language, and literacy skills.¹⁹ They are also less likely to be held back in school or to need special education,²⁰ and more likely to be proficient in reading and math.²¹ Preschool participants also have an increased probability of graduating from high school.²² 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 socio-emotional behavior.²³

“National security rests partly upon high-quality child care helping children develop into successful adults, which is not possible without a well-supported early childhood workforce.”



**Brigadier General (Ret.)
Stephen Curda**
U.S. Army, Chicago

A smaller, but significant, number of long-term studies directly examine the link between preschool participation and crime prevention. Most recently, 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 with non-enrollees.²⁴ 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 18.²⁵ By age 24, the people served by the CPC were 20 percent less likely to have served time in jail or prison.²⁶

Home-visiting programs of “coaching” assistance for new and expecting parents also yield myriad benefits. These voluntary programs help improve public safety by helping to prevent children's future involvement in crime,²⁷ promote school readiness and academic achievement,²⁸ and help reduce substance misuse.²⁹ They can also strengthen the economy by

fostering families' economic independence and helping children become productive adults.³⁰ Further, home-visiting programs have implications for national security through their impact on obesity, one of the major medical disqualifiers for military service.³¹

In sum, early childhood programs can set children on a path to successful adulthood. However, these programs 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 staff.**

Staff are the foundation of high-quality early childhood programs

The heart of any early childhood education program is the relationship between the teacher and the children.³² Research indicates that a well-qualified workforce is an essential, fundamental component of high-quality ECE. In fact, one study found that the teacher-child relationship was the aspect of preschool quality most closely linked to child learning outcomes.³³ Highly-qualified teachers engage in warm, nurturing interactions with the children to support their development in all areas. Excellent teachers also provide developmentally-appropriate instruction in key early literacy, math and other academic skills.³⁴ To support 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.³⁵ Adequate compensation is key to attracting and retaining top talent.³⁶ Retaining teachers is particularly important for young children, since positive, stable relationships support healthy development.

A strong workforce is a prerequisite for high-quality home-visiting programs as well. Home visitors form a close bond with vulnerable parents of infants and toddlers, and this relationship is the mechanism through which programs positively impact parent and child outcomes. The home-visiting workforce faces similar challenges as that of pre-K and child care concerning recruitment and retention, training and professional development, and compensation.³⁷

Key elements of a highly-qualified early childhood 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.³⁸

Few colleges and universities offer academic tracks related to home visiting. Unfortunately, the current home-visiting training system is fragmented, and home-visiting professionals are often “learning as they go.”³⁹

Professional development: The research regarding ongoing, in-service training for early education teachers offers more clarity than research on pre-service education.⁴⁰ 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.

However, providers face barriers to participating in professional development, including long work hours and low compensation.⁴¹ Further, investments in professional development can be lost when teachers leave their jobs, often due to inadequate compensation—another key reason to not only develop but retain talent.⁴²

Professional development training offers an opportunity to fill in gaps in formal coursework resulting from a lack of education programs for home-visiting staff. National survey data indicate that home-visiting professionals' top training priorities include early childhood mental health and serving children or parents with disabilities.⁴³

Compensation: Adequate compensation is required to attract and retain a high-quality ECE workforce.⁴⁴ But ECE teachers typically earn substantially less than other teachers. In Illinois, the annual mean wage for child care teachers is \$28,730 and for preschool teachers is \$35,840, compared with \$65,790 for kindergarten teachers.⁴⁵ Low compensation is a major factor in ECE teachers leaving the field.⁴⁶

More than 70 percent of home-visiting professionals hold bachelor's degrees or higher,⁴⁷ yet pay for home-visiting positions fails to reflect this. In Illinois, the median annual salary is \$35,652 for home visitors who work for Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program-funded initiatives.⁴⁸

The path forward for Illinois' early childhood workforce

Illinois policymakers must address each of the key elements of early childhood workforce quality in a comprehensive strategy. This approach is essential because the elements are interrelated; for example, if

“The early childhood workforce plays a critical role in crime prevention by laying the foundation for kids to succeed academically and socially.”



John Idleburg
Lake County Sheriff

compensation remains low, staff 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 staff pre-service education.

A number of important, pandemic-era innovations have focused on the need to boost early childhood workforce compensation, often infused with vital, federal, COVID-relief funding. Examples include the up-to-\$1,000 bonuses Gov. Pritzker and the Illinois Department of Human Services made available to many child care staff in fall 2021 and winter 2022. Even more significant were the hundreds of millions of dollars in Strengthen & Grow grant resources initiated in 2021, intended to provide eligible child care centers and homes with more predictable funding to—in turn—incent staff recruitment, retention, and compensation increases. At least half of these funds were restricted to use in new

personnel and workforce initiatives, with an eye toward reaching underserved communities. This is an effort policymakers should continue to extend, build, and expand upon.

Similarly, Illinois should further support and extend such training-and-education measures as the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity Scholarship Program, established in 2021 to help strengthen the credentials of early care and learning professionals. This venture pulled-together 60 two- and four-year higher education institutions in collaborative efforts to retain committed early childhood staff and help them to improve their skills — aims that “articulation” considerations have often frustrated in the past, when students have transferred from one school to another.

In addition, state leaders should further invest in such proven supports as Infant/ Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) efforts, in which highly trained professionals work with teachers and parents of children in early childhood settings to address such difficulties as student behavior problems. Studies have



shown this approach can strengthen children’s social-emotional skills, benefiting not only children but their educators by improving learning environments, reducing stress, bolstering teachers’ skills, and increasing positive parental involvement—all ways of retaining and supporting vital staff. As with many other aspects of early care and education, IECMHC resources are far too limited to reach existing needs.

Conclusion

High-quality early childhood programs are a powerful means of supporting children’s development while their parents work, as well as supporting vulnerable families to optimize children’s outcomes. However, this potential will only be fully realized when children can participate in quality programs supported by a highly-qualified early childhood workforce with adequate education, ongoing professional development, and sufficient compensation.

As our state further recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic, policymakers must continue to grow access to early childhood programs and address the needs of the early childhood workforce. Support for high-quality early childhood programs is an investment in our future public safety, national security, and economic well-being.

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