

QUALITY CHILD CARE AND EARLY LEARNING IN RHODE ISLAND

High-quality early learning opportunities improve the odds that children will succeed in school and life. Researchers have found that children enrolled in high-quality early care and education programs show improved school readiness and school achievement. Children attending high-quality programs are less likely to repeat grades, drop out of school, or need special education than children who have not had high-quality educational experiences. Participation in research-based, high-quality early education programs has also been shown to have lifelong effects, including improved lifetime earnings and reduced likelihood of criminal behavior.¹

A substantial amount of learning takes place during the early childhood years. Achievement gaps linked to family economic status appear between birth and kindergarten entry. Striking differences in vocabulary become apparent during the early childhood years.² A national study found that an average 4-year old in a family receiving cash assistance has heard about 13 million spoken words, while a child from a working class family has heard about 26 million, and a child from a professional family almost 45 million.³ Participation in high-quality child care and early learning programs can help to close these gaps in school readiness.

PUBLIC INVESTMENTS IN EARLY LEARNING

All 50 states in the U.S. invest in child care subsidy systems to enable low-income parents to access child care while they work and to support child development. Access to licensed child care ensures children's safety and well-being and, when the child care is high-quality, also promotes early learning. In addition, most states across the country (38 out of 50) invest in pre-kindergarten programs for children ages 3 and 4 to expand access to early childhood education so more children are prepared to succeed in school. Sixteen states provide funding to supplement the federal investment in Head Start which provides preschool education and comprehensive services to young children from very low-income families.⁴



KEY PROGRAM QUALITY ELEMENTS LEAD TO POSITIVE CHILD OUTCOMES

Common design elements of effective early childhood education programs include:

- ◆ **Highly skilled teachers.** In general, the more years of college education and the more specific early childhood training staff have, the better the observed quality of the program and the better the developmental outcomes for children.^{5,6,7}
- ◆ **Small class sizes and high staff-to-child ratios.** Small numbers of children in a classroom or group and low numbers of children per staff member predict higher quality programming and improved developmental outcomes.^{8,9,10}
- ◆ **Age-appropriate curricula and stimulating materials in a safe physical setting.** Programs that help teachers implement intentional, content-driven curricula that is engaging and fun for young children strengthen children's early literacy and math skills.^{11,12} The curricula must create a safe, affirming learning environment that respects and recognizes the individuality of each child, including the key role of a child's culture and language to their social-emotional development.¹³
- ◆ **A language-rich environment.** Staff who ask children questions, tell stories, sing songs, read books, use descriptive words when talking about objects and events, and consistently respond to what children say and ask are delivering high-quality programming that helps children learn.^{14,15}
- ◆ **Warm, responsive interactions between staff and children.** Frequent and positive interactions between staff and children is strongly and consistently associated with good developmental outcomes for children.^{16,17} Programs that reflect the cultures and diversity of the children they serve and intentionally address the strengths and needs of children with disabilities support healthy child development.



THE NEED TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS

◆ Researchers have consistently found that most early childhood programs and child care settings are not delivering high-quality levels of teaching, learning and developmental supports.^{18,19,20} A major national study of young children estimated that only 9% of children in the U.S. receive high-quality care.²¹ The wide variation in quality among early childhood programs is attributed to a lack of resources in the field resulting in a workforce with low levels of education and training, poor compensation and high rates of turnover.²²



ESTIMATED QUALITY OF CHILD CARE, UNITED STATES



Source: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (2006). *The NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development: Findings for children up to age 4 1/2 years*. Bethesda, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health.



TEACHER QUALIFICATIONS, PROGRAM COST AND QUALITY

“Given the current demographics of the United States, a key component of quality programming is a culturally competent, ethnically and linguistically diverse workforce well-prepared to foster the healthy development of an increasingly diverse population of young children and families.”

– Hedy Chang. *Getting Ready for Quality*. Oakland, CA: California Tomorrow.

- ◆ Early care and education is expensive, regardless of its quality. Early childhood programs have high labor costs because young children’s safety and well-being require that relatively small numbers of children be assigned to each staff member. Improving staff-child ratios, lowering group size and hiring more qualified staff have a direct impact on program budgets and translate into higher fees for families. Thus, high-quality early childhood programs are even more expensive than low-quality programs.²³
- ◆ Researchers have consistently found that staff with at least a bachelor’s degree and specialized training in early childhood development and education are the best equipped to deliver high-quality learning experiences for children. In general, adults with bachelor’s degrees have significantly higher literacy levels than do adults with less education. Children in early childhood classrooms where teachers have college degrees have better language skills, understand more words and engage in more creative activities.²⁴
- ◆ Despite these research findings, early childhood educators across the country typically have very little formal education beyond high school.²⁵ In Rhode Island, the minimum licensing requirement for a lead group teacher in a child care center classroom is a high school diploma. In addition, Rhode Island licensing regulations require that every child care center employ one Head Teacher with a bachelor’s degree and early childhood training to support and supervise classroom staff.²⁶ Rhode Island family child care regulations require all providers newly licensed after October 1, 2007 to have a high school diploma but exempt from that requirement those who were licensed previously.²⁷
- ◆ Across the U.S., early childhood educators in the child care field are disproportionately people of color, are almost always women, and earn poverty level wages.²⁸ Low wages lead to high rates of staff turnover. Nationally, teacher turnover in child care programs is two to three times higher than in grades K-12.²⁹
- ◆ Increasingly, bachelor's degrees are being required for lead teachers in early learning classrooms. Without careful policy attention, this is likely to decrease the diversity of the early childhood teaching workforce. It will be critical to develop investments and strategies that create access to higher education for adult students and pathways for advancement for early childhood teachers already in the field.³⁰

T.E.A.C.H.— TEACHER EDUCATION AND COMPENSATION HELPS

- ◆ The T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood project, operating in 22 states across the U.S., is a national model designed to increase staff education and compensation and reduce turnover. T.E.A.C.H. provides scholarships to early childhood educators to complete coursework in higher education, to pursue college degrees and to receive increased compensation. In states across the country, T.E.A.C.H. participants are steadily accumulating college credits, earning degrees, and increasing their earnings while staying in the field. Turnover rates for T.E.A.C.H. program scholarship recipients are far less than the national rate.

Source: Child Care Services Association (2007)



AFFORDABLE, HIGH QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

- ◆ Families struggle to pay for early care and education. Across the country, the average working family with two children (an infant and a preschooler) pays more for child care than the median cost of rent and about as much as the average monthly mortgage payment.³¹
- ◆ There is very little public funding for early care and education compared to funding for K-12 education. The federal government provides core funding for child care subsidies and Head Start. All states provide additional funding for child care subsidies. In addition some states provide funding for Head Start and many provide funding for Pre-Kindergarten programs. Rhode Island also invests in Comprehensive Child Care Services which is a Head Start-like program for low-income children.

CHILD CARE, HEAD START AND PUBLIC EDUCATION FUNDING, RHODE ISLAND, 2007

PROGRAM TYPE	PUBLIC FUNDING	PROGRAM STRUCTURE
Preschool child in a child care center	Up to \$7,800* per child per year. Available for families with incomes at or below 180% of the federal poverty guidelines.	250 days per year, 8-10 hours per day, teacher with at least a high school diploma, teacher-student ratio of 1 to 10
Preschool child in a Head Start program	Averages \$7,287 per child per year. Available for families with incomes at or below 100% of the federal poverty guidelines.	128-160 days per year, 3 1/2 - 6 hours per day, teacher with at least a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, teacher-student ratio of 1 to 10
Child in a public school K-12 classroom	Averages \$11,951 per child per year.	180 days per year, 6 hours per day, teacher with at least a bachelor's degree, teacher-student ratio of 1 to 12

* Families with incomes above 100% of the federal poverty guidelines must make co-payments.

CHANGES IN STATE FUNDING FOR CHILD CARE SUBSIDIES

- ◆ In 1998, Rhode Island passed Starting Right legislation as part of the Family Independence Act to guarantee access to child care subsidies for any working family with an income at or below 225% of the federal poverty guidelines. In 2007, the state eliminated child care assistance for families with incomes over 180% of the federal poverty guidelines, continued to freeze provider rates and increased family co-payments.
- ◆ The Starting Right legislation also required that the reimbursement rates paid by the state to providers participating in the child care subsidy program would keep pace with the market and would be adjusted bi-annually to meet the 75th percentile of a market rate survey. Provider rates have not increased since 2004 and are currently set based on the 2002 market rate survey.
- ◆ Maintaining competitive reimbursement rates for child care providers is critical to ensure that low-income families have access to high-quality programs. Low reimbursement rates make it very difficult for programs to offer salaries sufficient to recruit and retain well-qualified staff and to pay for other components needed for quality, including program materials, facilities, and professional development.³²



BUILDING A QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION SYSTEM

Building a quality early care and education system requires federal and state investments to ensure access to high-quality child care for working families and to support enrollment of young children in high-quality early education programs within child care, Head Start and pre-kindergarten programs.³³ It is critical that child care and early learning programs meet research-based quality standards since studies indicate that only very high-quality programs deliver long-lasting positive outcomes for children.³⁴

States across the country are establishing publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs for 3- and 4-year-olds to improve school readiness, particularly for low-income children.³⁵ It is important that new investments in pre-K programs be designed to meet the needs of working families and be integrated with and connected to the existing child care infrastructure. The child care system requires additional resources in order to achieve the high quality standards necessary to achieve early education goals.

A recent national report outlined the following infrastructure components as vital for a high-quality, coordinated early care and education system:

- ◆ Early learning standards that define desired outcomes for young children and program quality standards that specify operational benchmarks known to support positive outcomes for children.
- ◆ A program Quality Rating and Improvement System that encourages quality improvement and recognizes and rewards programs delivering higher quality early education.
- ◆ A high-quality professional development system that expands access to formal higher education, ensures the quality of training through a training approval process, provides incentives for training, and tracks the cumulative training and education of professionals.
- ◆ A common data management and reporting system that contains information on children, program quality and the early childhood workforce.³⁶



LICENSING IS THE FOUNDATION OF QUALITY

States develop rules and regulations for child care and early learning programs in order to ensure that available services meet a basic threshold of quality – that the building is safe and sanitary, that there is adequate supervision of children, and that the basic developmental needs of children are met.³⁷ Essential structural components of quality such as basic standards for staff-child ratio, group size, and staff qualifications are commonly established in state licensing rules. Consistent enforcement of regulations is a critical component of the regulatory process.³⁸

WHAT DO PARENTS VALUE?

- ◆ Studies examining how parents choose child care programs for their children have found that parents tend to prioritize factors related to convenience (hours of operation and location), affordability and reliability. Researchers have also found that parents have difficulty differentiating between low- and high-quality settings.³⁹
- ◆ A series of focus groups held locally found that Rhode Island families look first at safety, cleanliness and the presence of warm, friendly staff when they select a child care program. In addition, Rhode Island families value: qualified staff with early childhood training, low staff turnover, smaller numbers of children per teacher, smaller numbers of children in classrooms or groups, open and frequent communication with families, and educational activities for children.⁴⁰

BRIGHTSTARS: RHODE ISLAND'S QUALITY RATING AND IMPROVEMENT SYSTEM FOR CHILD CARE AND EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS

Program quality rating and improvement systems have been developed by 14 states as a uniform method to assess, improve and communicate the level of quality in early care and education settings.⁴¹ Rating systems build on licensing regulations and help policymakers and funders better understand the quality of programming available in the community and the quality improvement resources needed. These systems also help programs make important, incremental changes to achieve higher-quality benchmarks and help parents make informed decisions when selecting a program for their child.

Rhode Island has developed *BrightStars*, a voluntary quality rating and improvement system, to improve the care and education of infants, toddlers, preschoolers and school-aged children in the state. The *BrightStars* Quality Rating and Improvement System was developed by a team of local early childhood and school-age care professionals and reviewed by national experts. Programs participating in *BrightStars* receive a rating based on a five star scale that ranges from meeting all critical state licensing requirements (one star) to demonstrating exemplary practice across specific quality domains (five stars). A program's overall *BrightStars* quality rating is determined based on research-based benchmarks in each domain:

- ◆ **Child's Daily Experience:** Observed activities and interactions indicate that the program is providing a safe, healthy and enriching learning environment for children. Staff respect and enjoy working with children. The program reflects the cultures and diversity of the families and the community.
- ◆ **Curriculum and Child Assessment:** The program plans and implements intentional strategies to support and advance children's learning and development. Children's development and learning progress are monitored.
- ◆ **Indoor and Outdoor Space:** The physical environment is designed to promote children's safety, development and learning.
- ◆ **Staff-Child Ratios and Group Sizes:** The program has enough staff to ensure the safety of children and to promote strong staff-child relationships. The number of children in each room meets national benchmarks in order to promote children's healthy development and learning.
- ◆ **Family Communication and Involvement:** The program communicates regularly and effectively with families and offers a variety of opportunities for family involvement. The program works to build partnerships with families and encourages active two-way communication between families and the program.
- ◆ **Staff Qualifications and Professional Development:** Staff and administrators have formal education and appropriate professional training to guide and support the learning and development of children.
- ◆ **Program Management:** The program has financial management systems in place to promote quality and works to ensure that staff compensation and benefits are fair and adequate to retain qualified professionals. The program gathers information regularly from a variety of sources to assess program operations and has an up-to-date quality improvement plan.

BrightStars is managed by the Rhode Island Association for the Education of Young Children. Funding for the design and launch of BrightStars was provided by United Way of Rhode Island. Visit www.BrightStars.org.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategies to expand access to high-quality child care and early learning programs include:

- ◆ Increase child care subsidy rates paid to providers to the 75th percentile of the current market rate survey as required by the Starting Right legislation. Adequate subsidy rates help to ensure that low-income families have choices when selecting programs and providers have sufficient resources to deliver quality care.
- ◆ Restore the child care subsidies for families earning up to 225% of the federal poverty level to enable families to access child care that supports early learning and child development.
- ◆ Continue state investments in Head Start.
- ◆ Establish incentives for programs to participate in the *BrightStars* Quality Rating and Improvement System.
- ◆ Connect access to high-quality early childhood education with efforts to ensure high-quality K-12 education. Establish a Rhode Island pre-kindergarten initiative with sufficient funding and a first-rate accountability system to enable more children, particularly those in low-income families, to attend high-quality early learning programs.
- ◆ Secure resources to implement the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Project in Rhode Island to enable early childhood professionals to access affordable higher education and to connect increased education to increased compensation.
- ◆ Expand and support the early childhood professional development system in Rhode Island to ensure that early childhood program staff and family child care providers have access to best practice training and technical assistance to support program improvement.
- ◆ Strengthen the early childhood regulatory systems in Rhode Island – child care licensing at the Department of Children, Youth and Families and preschool approvals at the Rhode Island Department of Education – to ensure licensing and approval rules are up-to-date, enforcement of rules is consistent, efficient and effective, and the public has access to information about violations.
- ◆ Create a common data management system to track information about child care and early education programs in the state.



RESOURCES

BrightStars
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CHILDSPAN
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**Rhode Island Early Learning
Standards Project**
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Donalda Carlson, Rhode Island Department of Human Services; Brenda Almeida and Pam Hall, Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families; Michele Palermo, Karen Pucciarelli, and Gayle Justynski, Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; Blythe Berger, Rhode Island Department of Health; Shevaun Keogh-Walker, CHILDSPAN; Jennifer DeFrance, Clarissa Uttley and Tammy Camillo, Rhode Island Association for the Education of Young Children; Joyce Butler, Ready to Learn Providence; Larry Pucciarelli, Head Start Collaboration Office at the Rhode Island Department of Human Services; Kim Maine and Maryann Finamore-Allmark, Rhode Island Child Care Directors Association; Cindy Larson, Triumph, Inc.; Reeva Sullivan Murphy, National Child Care Information Center; Anne Mitchell, National Association for the Education of Young Children; Kelly Wishart, United Way of Rhode Island.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a children's policy organization that provides information on child well-being, stimulates dialogue on children's issues, and promotes accountability and action.

Primary funding for Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is provided by The Rhode Island Foundation, United Way of Rhode Island, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Prince Charitable Trusts, CVS/pharmacy Charitable Trust, Hasbro Children's Fund, Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust, Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island, UnitedHealthcare, Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Pre-K Now, Nellie Mae Education Foundation, Ocean State Charities Trust, Citizens Bank Foundation, Amica Companies Foundation, Advanced Financial Services and other corporate, foundation and individual sponsors.

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Production of the Issue Brief Series is made possible through the generous support of Hasbro Children's Fund