

Delaware's Progress and Potential in Early Childhood

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When leaders of the Rotary Club of Wilmington sat down to consider the top dozen or so attributes that would define a world-class city, one issue continued to emerge.

The issue was closely aligned with the Rotary's drive toward service above self and helping the community. It had transformative powers that could alter not only the lives of countless individuals and families, but could also strengthen and heal communities, while boosting our state's economy. The issue felt tangible enough—and close enough within our grasp—to present an opportunity to truly make an impact.

The issue was early child education and care.

As a longtime practitioner and leader in Delaware healthcare, I'm committed to seeing our local communities thrive in healthy households. After retiring from my 36-year career with Christiana Care, I've devoted my time and energy to groups like Rotary, Boy Scouts of America, and the Delaware Academy of Medicine, where I serve as board president. "Retirement" seems like a misnomer in my case—I like to think I've graduated onto my postgraduate work.

In these roles, I've explored key issues and collaborated with community partners on ways to enrich Delawareans' lives. And few societal levers hold the potential of child care.

I now know that, as Dr. Ross Thompson tells us in his piece on brain architecture in this issue, the early years are an "exuberant" time for brain development, and set the foundation for human development, beginning prenatally. Without quality early learning experiences, many of these important developmental milestones can be missed or delayed. By the time a child is transitioning into kindergarten, their executive functioning skill set has already been mostly developed.

Experts, educators, and everyone in-between agree that if a child does not arrive to kindergarten with these developmental tools, it becomes very hard to keep up academically. Unless you catch up, a child is unlikely to achieve their potential in school or as an adult.

This domino effect that starts so early can eventually lead to lower career earnings, higher healthcare costs, and may even lead to serving jailtime.¹

In other words, the early years are critically important. And frankly, Delaware is underserving its youngest citizens and their families.

Only about one in five children are enrolled in state-sponsored child care programs, and as a result, a whopping one third of children arrive at kindergarten already behind the curve.² Working families find it difficult to access state benefits but can't afford child care tuition, which can cost as much as a monthly mortgage. Caregivers are choosing to stay at home with young children instead of joining the workforce, hurting household incomes and our local economy.³ We know that in many industries, like healthcare and hospitality, workforce shortages have emerged with child care as the primary cause.

The good news is that local leaders, educators, advocates, and many others like me who simply care about the welfare of our state are rallying around this issue and demanding action. And Delaware is responding. Lawmakers have led the charge on historic increases in state-sponsored pre-K and Purchase of Care—the subsidy that covers tuition for low-income families.

But we need to swing for the fences to truly make a transformational change for future generations. Most developed countries have a majority of their children in educational programming before the age of five. It's time for the U.S. to catch up, and some states are charging ahead. New Mexico, Vermont, and Washington D.C. have provided access to early care and education starting at birth for most families. Delaware still ranks 39th among states for access to state funded pre-K for three- and four-year-olds, behind all our regional neighbors and states like Alabama and Mississippi.⁴

While Delaware has made substantial and historic progress over the last several years, we've mostly been chipping away, rather than undergoing transformational change. To get there, Delaware will need to invest at a level so that every child can access a quality program where educators are paid a family-sustaining wage with benefits.

We need everyday citizens—Rotarians, healthcare professionals, scouts, churches, and everyone in-between—to know the facts and make early childhood education a priority.

As our Rotary mantra goes, “Early child education: it's good for the child, it's good for the community, and it's good for the economy.” It's the future we all want for our state, and one of the best investments we can make for the good of public health.

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