

Early Investments Yield Long-Term Health and Community Returns

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Abstract

As leaders in the healthcare and business sectors, members of the Delaware Board of Directors for the American Heart Association, and advocates for cardiovascular health and well-being, we know that supporting Delaware's youngest children promotes public health and thriving communities.

Investing in Our Workforce

We have witnessed firsthand the workforce challenges facing the healthcare and business sectors in our state. Healthcare is one of Delaware's largest employers and is facing major shortages. Our workforce is contingent upon families and caregivers having access to quality child care and early education programs. Investments in these areas are vital to filling existing job openings, recruiting highly skilled workers, and attracting new companies to grow our economy.

A September 2023 online survey conducted by Rodell, the Delaware Association for the Education of Young Children (deaeyc), YMCA of Delaware, Delaware Readiness Teams, St. Michael's School and Nursery, and the First State Pre-K coalition found that working families in Delaware struggle to afford quality early care and education programs, including many who earn too much money to qualify for state-funded programs.¹ Hundreds of Delaware families with children ages 0-12 responded to the survey. These families continue to face limited supply and high costs for child care. Forty-four percent of respondents said they cannot find a program that has room, cannot find a program that meets the needs of their schedule, and cannot afford to send their child to a program. The findings also point to child care challenges as a hindrance to Delaware's economy and workforce participation. Sixty percent of respondents said they would get a job and/or pick up more hours or move from part-time to full-time employment if they could afford/access child care.

A 2014 White House report on the Economics of Early Childhood Investments reported that access to high-quality care for young children can help parents increase their employment, which strengthens their attachment to the labor force and increases their earnings potential. Higher labor force participation and earnings have potential benefits for children, such as lower healthcare expenditures, higher education spending, more consistently nutritious food, and reduced household budgeting stress.²

More recent data from 2023 show that the infant-toddler child care crisis costs families, businesses, and taxpayers in the U.S. a total of \$122 billion in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue.³ According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, investments in high-quality child care result in wide-ranging positive business outcomes, including increased employee performance, improved recruitment and retention, and future organizational growth.⁴

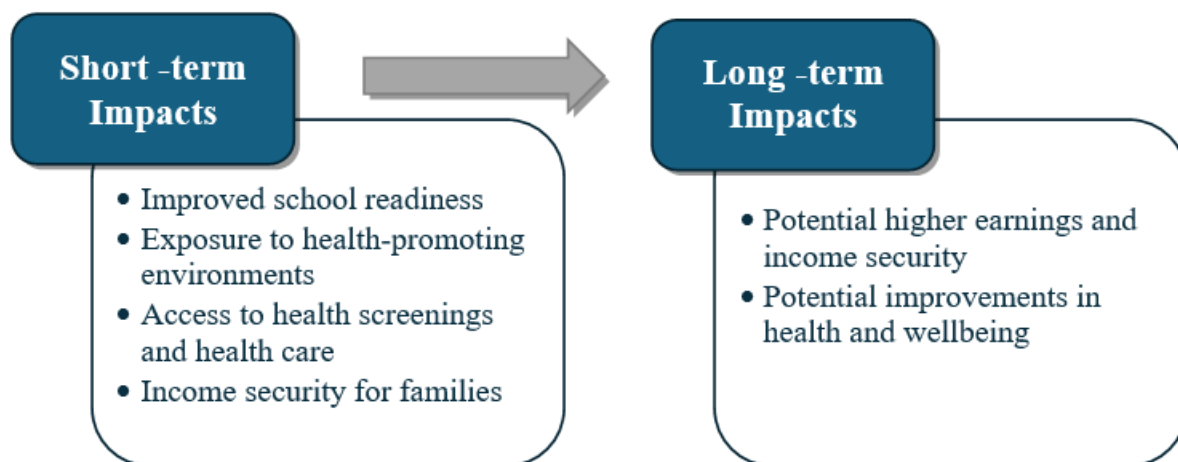
Supporting Children’s Health, Well-Being, and Public Health

As Board members and staff for the American Heart Association, we know that access to affordable, high-quality early care and education offers a range of benefits for children, both in the short and long term.

In the first few years of life, a child’s brain develops rapidly, building an important foundation for future learning, behavior, and health.⁵ Research shows that high-quality early care and education programs promote children’s school readiness by supporting cognitive, social-emotional, and behavioral development.⁶ Early care and education may affect children’s health directly via access to health screenings, healthcare, improved nutrition, or other health-promoting activities; and indirectly via increasing household resources resulting from increased parental employment or earnings.⁶

A growing body of research also supports the long-term health effects of participation in high-quality early care and education programs. Children who participate in early childhood programs may be more likely to, as adults, be healthy and have higher earnings, and may be less likely to commit crime and receive public assistance (Figure 1).⁷ Other studies show improvements in blood pressure, reductions in smoking, and improved self-reported health in adolescence and adulthood.⁶

Figure 1. Potential Impacts of Affordable, High-Quality Early Care and Education Programs on Children’s Development and Lifelong Health



Yet, stark disparities in young children’s access to, experience in, and outcomes during and after early learning vary drastically based on a child’s race and ethnicity, where they live, what languages they speak, and where they are from.⁸ The most impacted families are those facing systemic barriers while navigating public programs, including immigrants, families with low income, families with children who have disabilities (developmental delays or needs), and families who do not speak English as their primary language.⁹

Delaware has made important investments in quality early care and education programs. We must build on that foundation to shore up this essential sector and public health contributor. If we prioritize all children and families, we will support the workforce and ensure a strong child care and early education system for Delaware's future.

Conclusion

The American Heart Association is proud to work alongside Rodel, deaeyc, and the First State Pre-K coalition to increase state funding for vital programs including Purchase of Care (POC) and the Early Childhood Assistance Program (ECAP). Together, we can ensure quality early care and education programs are accessible and affordable for all Delaware families.

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