

First United Methodist Church Early Childhood Center, located in Conway, maintains the highest (Level 3) status with the Better Beginnings program, Arkansas's Quality Rating Improvement System.



Shaping our future economy: Return on investment for early childhood education

By Moriah Bruner

On average a child spends 11,500 hours in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings from birth to age five. This includes time spent in daycares, preschools, and other care environments. This critical period of development is when executive function matures, specifically the five “soft skills” necessary for success in the workforce later in life: problem solving, adaptability, time management, organization, and communication. In fact, 85 percent of a child’s intellect, personality, and social skills are developed by the age of five.

The Committee for Economic Development (CED), a nonprofit, nonpartisan, business-led public policy organization, supports state investments in high-quality ECCE for children ages birth to five and estimates a long-term return on investment of 16 percent, a higher return than investments in education for older children. The greatest determinant of quality is well-qualified instructional staff, yet national, state, and regional studies indicate a shortage of well-qualified early childhood educators due to low pay, scarce benefits, and high stress.

In Arkansas, employees in early childhood education are poorly compensated, work in under-resourced programs, and are difficult to retain. According to the 2017 UAMS workforce study on instructional staff in ECCE, 40 percent of employees reported being food insecure

(the number was 50 percent for ECCE workers caring for infants and toddlers). Furthermore, 50 percent of employees in the field were not offered health insurance through their jobs, 40 percent were not receiving any kind of education or credential to work with children, and 35 percent reported they planned to leave the ECCE field within two to five years.

To improve quality of life for an estimated 16,000 ECCE staff in Arkansas, increase educational outcomes for children in the state, and nurture a skilled workforce, public-private partnerships must be formed to solve the financial disincentives for careers in infant, toddler, and preschool education.

Jamie Rayford, chief operating officer at the Batesville Area Chamber of Commerce, sees her community coming together to address this important economic issue.

“Communities with future economic prosperity in mind should be, as we are in Independence County, taking a very hard look at the barriers preventing their residents from accessing quality, affordable early childhood education,” Rayford said. “If we want to get serious about building our workforce capacity, we have to get serious about preparing our youngest residents’ capacity to learn.”

Your community can get involved by:

- Raising awareness of the importance of early childhood education, including making parents, local elected officials, and the general public aware of the science of brain development and the importance of quality early learning experiences.
- Exploring options for quality incentives, including incentives for teachers and directors on the basis of educational attainment and retention as well as tax credits for program quality.
- Establishing a mentoring program facilitated by local experts to coach ECCE staff, especially in methods for teaching children with behavioral challenges and special needs.
- Paying close attention to the needs of infant/toddler teachers, who often face the greatest challenges of those working in ECCE.
- Sharing information with constituents about existing legislation currently underutilized that provides tax credits for eligible families who pay for early childhood education and allows businesses to receive tax credits for making certain contributions toward improving access to licensed quality programs.

There is much work to be done to increase access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education programs across the state. Nevertheless, investing in quality early learning experiences for our children now will yield a stronger workforce and more resilient and sustainable Arkansas communities.

More information and resources on this topic are available through Arkansas's Invest Early Coalition (www.aradvocates.org/campaigns/invest-early), UAMS Family and Preventative Medicine (familymedicine.uams.edu/arkansas-workforce-study), and T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood National Center (teachecnational-center.org).



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