

Why America Needs High-Quality Early Care and Education

Over the past three decades, business leaders have invested time, expertise and resources in efforts to improve K–12 education in the United States. What we have learned leads us to conclude that America’s continuing efforts to improve education and develop a world-class workforce will be hampered without serious federal and state commitments to high-quality early care and education for all children, zero through five. In challenging economic times, it is essential that public investment be as efficient and effective as possible. Investments in quality early care and education, with a particular focus on children most at risk, are a wise and safe investment in our nation’s success.

Quality Early Care and Education: A Focus on Zero to Five for the Right Start

Focusing resources on the first five years of life is essential to creating a system of learning and development that will meet the needs of young people and help American business stay competitive in the 21st century global economy. Scientific evidence clearly shows that children’s experiences during these early years heavily influence their growth and development. High-quality early care and education that focuses on children’s social, emotional, cognitive and physical development provides the foundation that children need to enter school ready to learn. As University of Chicago economist and Nobel Laureate James Heckman says, “Skill begets skill; motivation begets motivation. If a child is not motivated and stimulated to learn and engage early on in life, the more likely it is that when the child becomes an adult, [he or she] will fail in social and economic life.”

“The quality of life and the contributions a person makes to society as an adult can be traced back to the first few years of life. If a child from birth through age five receives support for development in cognition, language, motor skills, adaptive skills, and social/emotional functioning, he or she is more likely to succeed in school and in the workplace. However, if a child doesn’t have support for healthy development at an early age, the child is more at risk for negative outcomes, including dropping out of school, committing crime and receiving welfare payments as an adult” (Rolnick and Grunewald, 2003).

While it is clear from the research that all children can benefit from quality early childhood programs, those who are most at risk for later failure in school, in the workplace and in society will benefit the most from these programs. Studies show that far too many children are entering school ill prepared and that a wide gap exists between lower- and higher-income children, even before they enter kindergarten.

When children begin school behind, they tend to continue to fall further and further behind. High-quality early care and education can help close this gap. Long-term positive outcomes and cost-savings include improved school performance, reduced spending on special education and juvenile justice services, lower school dropout rates, and increased lifelong earning potential. In fact, economists have shown that investments in high-quality programs that focus on at-risk families produce greater returns than most other economic development projects. (See the appendix for a summary of this research.)

The Business Case: Investments in the First Five Years Yield High Returns

In today’s world, where education and critical skill levels determine future earnings, the economic and social costs to individuals, communities and the nation of not taking action on early childhood education are far too great to ignore, especially when the benefits far outweigh the costs. In recent years, leading economists have produced research that shows that investments in early childhood can yield tremendous public returns that more than repay the costs. Estimates of the return on investment

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of high-quality programs for low-income children range from \$4 to \$17 for every \$1 spent, depending on the program. Economist Robert Lynch has shown that even though a publicly financed, comprehensive early childhood development program for all children from low-income families would be expensive, the resulting budget savings over time would more than cover the costs. The research is also clear, however, that the return on investment is linked to quality; simply increasing participation without ensuring program quality will not produce positive results.

In addition to being a good long-term investment, high-quality early care and education provides a critical support for employed parents in helping them manage their work and family responsibilities. Employers also increasingly find that the availability of good early childhood programs is critical to reductions in absenteeism and increased productivity, as well as the recruitment and retention of parent employees.

Based on this strong business case, in recent years, leading corporate executives and renowned economists have provided much needed leadership in strongly urging for an investment in early care and education. Spurred on by the evidence of the tremendous returns on investing in early care and education, these “unlikely messengers” have led the call to approach early childhood development programs as an economic development strategy. By focusing on cost effectiveness and the bottom line, these leaders have succeeded in injecting powerful new evidence and messages into the discussion and have added an influential new group of champions for young children.

The Partnership for America’s Economic Success, managed and partially funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, was created by a group of business leaders, economists, advocates and funders in order to document the economic impacts of early investments in children. In 2008, the group released three new research studies, conducted by Greg Duncan of Northwestern University, William Dickens of the University of Maryland and Timothy Bartik of the Upjohn Institute. These reports conclude that strategic investments in children can have significant positive impacts on those children, their families and the nation’s fiscal health.

As business leaders, we see the discussion around early care and education as both an education issue and an economic development opportunity. Since states have primary responsibility for education, we believe that states need to take the lead in developing and funding a coherent early childhood

education system from the patchwork of programs and uneven services that exist today. The federal government also must play a leadership role. It must make high-quality early care and education a national priority and continue its historic role in focusing on the children most in need. Federal and state investments in early care and education must be coordinated in order to improve program quality and to serve more children.

Statement of Principles

Business Roundtable (BRT) and Corporate Voices for Working Families (CVWF) believe federal and state efforts to develop early care and education systems for children birth through age five must be based on a set of guiding Principles that define the components of a successful system and high-quality programs. These Principles draw on current early childhood research, lessons from K–12 education reform efforts and applicable lessons from the nation’s experience in building a voluntary system of higher education. The six Principles below are interconnected; they are not listed in priority order. BRT, CVWF and others will use these Principles to assess existing early education programs; consider philanthropic priorities; evaluate policy proposals on prekindergarten, Head Start and other programs; and formulate policy positions.

1. LEARNING. A successful early childhood education system views children’s learning as the central mission. It should:

- Provide positive learning experiences that foster the interconnections among children’s social, emotional, cognitive and physical development; nurture children’s strong inborn drive to learn and joy in learning; and develop learning-related skills that help children succeed in school, at work and in life;
- Engage children in developmentally appropriate experiences with English language literacy and mathematics, and encourage family literacy programs to reinforce these experiences;
- Hold the same high expectations for success for all children while also respecting and supporting the diversity of children’s families, cultures, races and socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as the different ways that young children learn and the rates at which they progress; and
- Include healthy nutrition, safe environments, facilities conducive to learning, and diagnostic screening with effective follow-up services to treat disabilities or health problems that might affect children’s ability to learn.

2. STANDARDS. A successful early childhood education system articulates standards for children's learning and program quality that align with state K–12 academic standards. It should:

- Align the objectives of the early childhood education system and the state's standards in the early grades of school;
- Adopt evidence-based curriculum options and program standards that enable early childhood education to achieve and sustain results for children;
- Endorse research-based indicators for what children need to know and be able to do when they enter school that respect the diverse ways that children grow and learn; and
- Use the results of regular and appropriate diagnostic assessments of children's performance to improve instructional practice.

3. TEACHERS. A successful early childhood education system ensures that teaching staff possess the skills, knowledge and attitudes to help young children enter school prepared to succeed. It should:

- Employ skilled teaching staff who have a college degree and/or demonstrated knowledge and skill commensurate with the requirements of the position and meet performance criteria such as English verbal skills and the ability to connect with and teach young children;
- Require effective preparation as well as ongoing professional development that helps staff improve the quality of their teaching, become ongoing learners about children's development and learning and effective ways to teach, and move through an articulated, degree-granting system, where appropriate; and
- Institute differentiated salaries based on the experience and competencies of teachers that, given the importance of consistent relationships to children's learning, are adequate to attract and retain a qualified teaching staff.

4. PARENTS. A successful early childhood education system supports parents as their children's first teachers and provides high-quality program options to parents who choose to enroll their children. It should:

- Provide access to high-quality early childhood programs for families seeking out-of-home early childhood education for their children, regardless of their socioeconomic status;
- Offer seamless ways to meet the need of some families for care during the time they are working as well as the need for early learning experiences for their children; and

- Promote practical and effective strategies for parents to be involved in and support their children's learning at home and in early education programs.

5. ACCOUNTABILITY. A successful early childhood education system embraces accountability for measurable results. It should:

- Collect the data and conduct the research needed to identify best practices, assess system performance and report these results to stakeholders;
- Evaluate the overall progress of children who have participated in early childhood education programs on the state's annual assessments required by the No Child Left Behind Act;
- Implement continuous improvement processes that put the lessons learned from research and evaluation into program standards and practice; and
- Establish incentives for meeting or exceeding objectives as well as consequences for persistent failure to achieve intended outcomes for children.

6. PARTNERSHIPS. A successful early childhood education system builds crosscutting partnerships to govern, finance, sustain and improve the system. It should:

- Create effective and efficient governance mechanisms that support community planning, program development and oversight;
- Involve key stakeholders at the federal, state and local levels, and encourage public/private partnerships to improve effectiveness, efficiency and accessibility;
- Include participation among all sectors of the early childhood field within the state, including public and private programs as well as those that take place in schools, centers and homes; and
- Insist on adequate, efficient and shared financing mechanisms that minimize duplication of effort and identify priorities for public investments in times of budgetary constraints as well as a blueprint for future expansion.

From Principles to Policy

In 1990, the nation's governors and the Administration set as their first National Education Goal, "By the year 2000, all children will start school ready to learn." Almost two decades later, there has been progress, but the goal remains unmet. Most states have made investments in early childhood education

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services and programs, and there is increasing interest in and support for state preschool programs for 3- to 4-year-olds. However, because of a patchwork of early childhood programs and inadequate funding streams, too many young children are not receiving adequate access to high-quality early care and education.

The reality of today's families — including those with employed parents and those with a parent at home — is that 73 percent of 3- to 5-year-old children are in some form of early childhood program on a regular basis (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Yet most of these programs are not high quality, despite the research that shows that only high-quality programs produce a strong return on investment. In challenging economic times, the need for quality early childhood programs is especially great, as many families need affordable, quality child care in order to find and retain employment.

We will not be able to reach the basic goal we set in 1990 without making significant new federal and state investments in early childhood. Instead of the current patchwork of programs and uneven services, we need a coordinated, comprehensive system of high-quality early care and education.

The Principles outlined in this statement provide a platform for federal and state action that is urgently needed. As noted earlier, education is largely a state responsibility, but the federal government has always played a very significant financial role in early childhood programs and must continue to do so. Although the federal role in early childhood is different from its role in K–12 and higher education, policymakers should examine relevant lessons from federal initiatives that have strengthened both higher education and K–12 education.

In terms of higher education, the federal government's first priority is to help low-income students gain access to postsecondary institutions. The federal government has helped states build a voluntary higher education system that is the envy of the rest of the world. The federal government could take a similar role in the early childhood arena, helping to provide financial support so that low-income children can have access to high-quality programs while also helping states build the infrastructure for high-quality programs — including building staff capacity.

In terms of elementary and secondary (K–12) education, the federal government provides less than 9 percent of the overall resources but influences the entire system because these resources link their assistance for low-income students in low-performing schools with requirements for rigorous state accountability systems that include all students. Although early childhood education and care is very different from the public K–12 system because it has a higher percentage of federal funding and a mix of public and private providers, we believe that the federal government could use a similar model of linking resources with accountability by pairing federal investments with requirements for strong state accountability systems that measure results, ensure high program standards and expand the numbers of children served.

We are well aware that economic conditions, budgets and political considerations can hinder or hasten domestic policy initiatives. But especially in uncertain times, we must plan for the future and make cost-effective decisions. We urge decisionmakers in the public and private sectors — the U.S. Congress, the Administration, local and state governments, school boards, the business community, and other leaders — to make early childhood education a high priority by supporting and endorsing these Principles and launching a multisector planning process to identify incremental and additional revenue streams required for implementation. BRT and CVWF are committed to working with all stakeholders to build a high-quality early learning system for today's and tomorrow's young children.

Appendix: Supporting Research

By the time children enter kindergarten, there already is a wide gap in their readiness for school.

- At age 3, high socioeconomic status (SES)¹ children have average vocabularies of 1,100 words, middle SES children have average vocabularies of 750 words and low SES children have average vocabularies of 480 words (Hart and Risley, 1995).
- Lower SES children enter school with much poorer skills in the major areas of development and learning. Average achievement scores for kindergarten children in the highest SES group are 60 percent higher than those in the lowest SES group (Lee and Burkam, 2002).
- Only 47 percent of low SES kindergartners are likely to have attended a center-based program (including Head Start) prior to kindergarten entry, compared with 66 percent of higher SES children. Moreover, higher SES children have access to higher-quality programs, further benefiting them (Lee and Burkam, 2002).
- Early family environments are major predictors of cognitive and noncognitive abilities. Environments that do not stimulate children and fail to cultivate these abilities place children at an early disadvantage (Heckman, 2006).

When children begin kindergarten behind, they continue to fall further and further behind.

- During the kindergarten year, children who are deemed at risk for later school failure because of their family backgrounds make gains in basic skills such as letter recognition, counting and comparing object size. Yet these children remain further behind children with fewer at-risk factors because the more advantaged children make even greater gains in reading and math skills in school than their less advantaged counterparts (West, Denton and Reaney, 2001).
- The longer society waits to intervene in the life cycle of an at-risk child, the more costly it is to remediate disadvantage. Later remediation for early disadvantage is possible, but to attain what is accomplished by early investment is much more costly (Heckman, 2008).

1. Throughout this appendix, we refer to the effects of socioeconomic status (SES) and family income, which are different. In addition to income, SES takes into account such characteristics as parental education and social status.

High-quality early childhood programs can make a difference in school readiness despite poverty and other risk factors in children's backgrounds.

- A review of the literature on early childhood education, especially compensatory programs for the children most at risk, reveals that programs should promote not only cognitive development, but also social and emotional development, particularly the development of skills related to executive functions of the brain if they are to make the most difference (Blair, 2002).
- Children, including those of low and high SES, who attend high-quality centers score significantly higher on measures of skills and abilities that are important for school success compared with children from lower-quality centers. While children's abilities are typically related to their families' income level, the quality of the early childhood experiences can make a difference over and above the effects of family characteristics (Bryant, Maxwell, Taylor, Poe, Peisner-Feinberg and Bernier, 2003).

High-quality early childhood education programs focused on low-income children have a high return on investment.

- In the short term, longitudinal studies of high-quality early childhood programs, including the Perry Preschool Program, the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention Project and the Chicago Child Parent Center Program, find increased achievement test scores, decreased rates of being held back in school and decreased placement in special education among low-income children. In the longer term, studies also find increased high school graduation and decreased crime and delinquency rates (Schweinhart, Barnes and Weikart, 1993; Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling and Miller-Johnson, 2002; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson and Mann, 2001; Galinsky, 2006).
- Providing all 20 percent of the nation's 3- and 4-year-old children who live in poverty with a high-quality early childhood program would have a substantial payoff for governments and taxpayers in the future. As those children grow up, costs for remedial and special education, criminal justice, and welfare benefits would decline. Once in the labor force, their incomes would be higher, along with the taxes they would pay back to society (Lynch, 2004).

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- When using an internal rate of return, which compares public and private return on investments, high-quality early childhood programs fare well. Model early childhood programs have generated benefit-cost ratios ranging from 2:1 to 17:1, depending on the program (Karoly, Kilburn and Cannon, 2005).
- Investments in programs that focus on at-risk families produce much greater returns than most other economic development projects (Grunewald and Rolnick, 2006).
- Over the long term, high-quality early childhood programs have been shown to increase job growth to a greater degree than business subsidies, a mechanism traditionally used for state economic development. From a national perspective, quality early childhood programs provide earnings effects at least three times greater than business subsidies (Bartik, 2008).
- Early care and education programs can generate government savings that more than repay their costs and produce returns to society as a whole that outpace most public and private investments (Kilburn and Karoly, 2008).

There is evidence that high-quality programs will benefit middle-class children as well.

- At the beginning of kindergarten, the gap between middle and higher SES children is larger than the gap between lower and middle SES children in achievement scores assessing literacy and mathematics (Lee and Burkam, 2002).
- An indication that middle-class² children might substantially benefit from preschool education is that they have relatively high rates of being held back in school and school dropout rates — problems that early childhood education has been found to reduce. Middle-income children have a 12 percent rate of being held back in school compared with 17 percent for low-income children and 8 percent for high-income children. Likewise, middle-income children have an 11 percent school dropout rate, compared with 23 percent for low-income children and 3 percent for high-income children (Barnett, 2003; Wat, 2008).
- A study conducted by researchers at Georgetown University that included a substantial number of middle-income children found substantial gains in cognitive skills for middle-class 4-year-olds enrolled in school-based pre-kindergarten programs and Head Start programs (Gormley, 2008).

High-quality early childhood education is important to business.

- Numerous studies reveal that there is a cost to business in not responding to its employees' need for reliable and good-quality early childhood programs. Employees are likely to miss work when they spend long hours trying to find early childhood programs or when they deal with the often-tenuous arrangements they have, especially when these arrangements fall apart. When employees with these problems are at work, they have difficulty concentrating because they are worried about their children (Galinsky and Johnson, 1998).
- Companies have also found that there are business benefits in providing their own employees with assistance in finding and improving early childhood programs, including improved recruitment and retention (Galinsky and Johnson, 1998; Galinsky, Bond and Sakai, 2008). Employees with access to family-supportive programs and policies are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs, to be loyal, to go the extra mile to help their companies succeed and to stay at their jobs (Bond, Galinsky and Swanberg, 1998; Bond, Galinsky and Hill, 2004).

2. In this calculation, low-income children are in the bottom 20 percent of family income levels, middle-class children are in the 20 to 80 percent range and high-income children are in the top 20 percent.

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About Business Roundtable

Business Roundtable is an association of chief executive officers of leading U.S. companies with more than \$5 trillion in annual revenues and nearly 10 million employees. Business Roundtable unites these top CEOs, amplifying their diverse business perspectives and voices on solutions to some of the world's most difficult challenges. Combining those insights with policy know-how, Business Roundtable innovates and advocates to help expand economic opportunity for all Americans.

Business Roundtable believes the basic interests of business closely parallel the interests of American workers, who are directly linked to companies as consumers, employees, shareholders and suppliers. Business Roundtable's Education, Innovation and Workforce initiative, one of five focus areas, advocates for public policies that prepare children, students and workers to succeed in our rapidly changing world. Visit our Web site at www.businessroundtable.org.

About Corporate Voices for Working Families

Corporate Voices for Working Families is the leading national business membership organization representing the private sector on public policy issues involving working families. A nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, we improve the lives of working families by developing and advancing innovative policies that reflect collaboration among the private sector, government and other stakeholders.

To create bipartisan support for issues affecting working families, we facilitate research in areas spotlighting the intersecting interests of business, community and families: workforce readiness, family economic stability and flexibility in the workforce.

Collectively our 50 partner companies, with annual net revenues of more than \$1 trillion, employ more than 4 million individuals throughout all 50 states. Visit our Web site at www.cvworkingfamilies.org.

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