



Investing in the Early Years: Great Returns over the Short and Long Haul

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Children's development in the first five years can open the door to elementary school success or create barriers that can last a lifetime. Most of the brain's "wiring" is complete by age five, and for many children, language and cognitive growth is explosive. However, some children, especially those from lower income families, enter kindergarten with just 20% of the productive vocabulary of middle and upper income children. As many as 25% of the state's five year olds enter kindergarten without the language, cognitive and behavioral skills necessary for early learning success. By 4th grade, 40% of Connecticut's children do not achieve proficiency on the state's mastery tests.

The impact of school "unreadiness" can be quantified in fiscal, as well as human, terms. Unready children are retained in kindergarten and first grade at much higher rates than ready children, and they require higher levels of special education services. Long term costs accrue through the lack of high school completion, early pregnancy, involvement with the welfare system, and incarceration.

Families are children's first teachers but because many families work full time, they rely on others to provide quality early care and early education for their children. Over 90% of the state's children ages five or younger live in families with at least one working parent. Nearly two out of three Connecticut children live in families where the only parent or both parents are in the full time labor force. Yet, purchasing early care is expensive. The cost of early care for many Connecticut families with young children represents their second largest expense, just behind housing. Licensed early care costs for infants and toddlers can range from \$7,000 to \$15,000 (or more) per child per year. Licensed early care and

education for preschool age children can range from \$6,800 to \$10,000 (or more) per year.

Connecticut has been a leader in early care and education, and can be again. In 1997-98, the CT General Assembly passed and provided initial funding for our nationally renowned School Readiness Program. Outside evaluation of the centers funded in this program show strong positive results for children's learning. These programs specifically serve preschoolers in priority school districts. Yet despite their proven success, between 15,000 and 18,000 at risk preschoolers still are waiting for slots in quality school readiness programs.

In August 2004, Governor M. Jodi Rell called for a public-private effort to create an early childhood education system that is the best in the nation, beginning with the school readiness programs for these at risk children.

Connecticut can improve quality and expand access to high quality services by:

- Fully funding Care 4 Kids, State Funded Child Development Centers, Head Start and School Readiness programs;
- Restoring funding to and expanding the eligibility for the Birth-to-Three program;
- Increasing DSS "quality enhancement" funding to (1) increase compensation for and access to higher education degrees for teachers, and (2) facilitate National Association for the Education of Young Children accreditation; and
- Expanding opportunities for Full Day Kindergarten as part of reform of the Education Cost Sharing (ECS) formula.