

Child Care, the Other Education System

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Introduction

Have you heard the story about the man who lost his keys on his way home one night? His searching attracted the attention of passersby who joined him in his quest. After some time, one of those lending assistance asked him, "Where did you drop the keys?" He replied, "Oh, I dropped them over on that corner." Surprised by his answer, they asked, "Why are we looking over here?" He shot back, "Because the light is better here!"

Since the public education system is structured around a K-12 model, most of the discussion about innovation occurs under that bright light. Yet any meaningful conversation about school reform must take into account the little-discussed reality that most of a child's social-emotional and academic capacities are formed in the first five years of life, before he or she ever gets to public school. Anyone who cares about innovative and effective education reform must understand the critical role of the first five years in learning; know the dynamics, constraints and potential of the early child care system; and be willing to dream big about what we can do to make the most of these formative early years.

Recent brain research has confirmed what education professionals and social scientists have known for decades from their own work—that early experiences are foundational to human growth and development. For example, issues of trust and mistrust are formed in the first year of life based on adult responsiveness to the infant's needs. We have also learned that the brain trims synapses for languages that are not heard or spoken by age three, which means that one can never be a native speaker of a language he or she is not exposed to before that time.

Of course, children's early experiences are vastly different from one another, and we know that those growing up in poverty are at much greater risk for school failure.

Landmark research conducted by Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley (2003) showed that, by age three, children from privileged families have heard 30 million more words than children from underprivileged families. Longitudinal data on 42 families examined what accounted for enormous differences in rates of vocabulary growth. Follow-up data indicated that the measures of accomplishment of three-year-olds predicted third-grade school achievement.

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There is, however, one thing that the majority of young

children in the United States do have in common. More than two thirds of our nation's preschoolers are in some type of child care setting before formally starting school. Consider these numbers: Children spend as much as 10 hours a day, 50 weeks a year, in a child care setting; those enrolled as infants will spend the same number of hours in child care from the ages of birth to five as they will in the entire K–12 system. This is particularly the experience of at-risk children. In Philadelphia, 56 percent of preschool children are living in single parent households, (2007 Projections based on the 2000 U.S. Census from ESRI, Inc.) and welfare reform has led to a disproportionate percentage of children from low-income families being represented in the child care system. It is time we faced the reality that the child care system is the de facto education system for the majority of young children in this country—and to consider how that system can best meet the needs of our youngest children.

Since the 1960s several longitudinal studies have examined the effect of early childhood education programs (including child care) on very young children. The results are conclusive that high-quality early education is the most effective intervention strategy to compensate for factors that put children at risk for school failure. In Pennsylvania, an evaluation of Pennsylvania's Pre-K Counts (PKC) program (Bagnato et al. 2010) demonstrates that high-quality early education programs make a significant impact on a child's early success in

school. Specifically, children in Philadelphia have historical special education placement rates (as defined by children with Individual Education Plans) of 13.6 percent. For children who participated in PKC, that rate dropped to 4.9 percent.

The Value of Public Investment

There has been growing recognition across the United States that public investment in early education programs yields a significant positive return. Two states, Oklahoma and Georgia, have publicly funded universal pre-K programs that provide one additional year of schooling for four-year-olds. While this is an important effort, it falls far short of the real potential within early education. If one year of quality part-day preschool can achieve the dramatic results of PKC, imagine what a full-day, full-year, high-quality child care program for five years could do to impact a child's academic, social, emotional and physical readiness on arrival at the kindergarten door. Imagine what this investment would mean for utilizing school funding more effectively in later years, by reducing the number of children underperforming or needing special assistance.

Unfortunately, while taxpayers are growing more willing to invest in preschool services, there remains deep ambivalence toward investing significant resources in the child care system. While we accept the notion that education serves a public good, the idea that "caring for

other people's children" is more than an individual responsibility is suspect. Yet, the real gold is to be mined by transforming the child care system from a custodial model—that provides for the minimum health and safety of children while their parents work—to one that fully exploits the learning opportunities that exist for young children.

Sadly, we have a crisis in the quality of child care in the United States that stems from a severe lack of resources. Consider the jarring difference in average spending for early education as compared to that for the K–12 system. According to the *Costing Out Study* (Augenblick, Palaich 2007), the average annual amount spent on students in the K–12 education system in Pennsylvania in 2005–06 was \$9,512 per child (which, incidentally, is approximately \$2,500 less than what is calculated to be needed for all students to reach Pennsylvania's academic proficiency and performance expectations). This stands in stark contrast to Pennsylvania's average investment per child served under the age of five. At \$2,900 annually, this is clearly inadequate for providing a quality early education experience that produces positive outcomes for children, families and communities.

Three Solutions to the Crisis of Quality

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The solutions to this dilemma are entirely within our grasp.

First, we need a paradigm shift. Historically, child care services have been funded through the welfare/human services sector, and viewed as a work support system. In 2003, Pennsylvania took an important step toward recognizing the child care system as part of the educational continuum by establishing the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL), with accountability to both the Department of Public Welfare and the Pennsylvania Department of Education. This new entity has brought needed coordination to the various funding streams for early education programs, successfully leveraged new resources, and firmly established that programs serving young children fall under the rubric of early learning.

Second, the quality of child care programs must be raised. Currently, it is possible to obtain a license to operate a child care program with no meaningful educational content, simply by meeting minimal standards for health and safety. Pennsylvania, like 29 other states, has adopted a voluntary Quality Rating System (QRS) that offers incentives and resources to help programs reach higher standards in areas such as staff credentials, curriculum and management practices. Child care providers in Keystone STARS can earn a STAR rating from 1 to 4, with levels 3 and 4 representing substantial degrees of program quality.

It is worth noting that the majority of child care providers want to offer quality programs. Across the state, close to

75 percent of the child care sector participates in Keystone STARS, but only 20 percent of programs have achieved high quality ratings—primarily because of the scarcity of resources. Even though Pennsylvania’s financial incentives for STARS are among the most generous in the country for a QRS, they still fall far short of fully funding the cost of quality. To fully realize the promise of Keystone STARS, the financial outlay has to be aligned with the actual cost of meeting these standards.

This funding gap is most clearly evident in the human resources domain. Staff who hold a four-year degree and work in a child care setting earn on average \$24,000 a year, roughly half the salary of their public school counterparts. Only 25 percent of child care staff receives employer-funded health insurance, and fewer still have retirement benefits. The annual staff turnover rate in the child care sector has consistently hovered at around 30 percent for two decades (Bradley 2001), a fact that keeps programs in crisis and robs children of the secure, responsive relationships that are foundational to growth and learning.

Pennsylvania has one of the most promising early learning systems in the nation. Programs like Keystone STARS and Pennsylvania T.E.A.C.H., a college scholarship program that supports full-time child care workers to upgrade their education credentials, have been fully embraced by the child care community. Providers have demonstrated their commitment to the quality agenda, but they have yet to

be given the full resources to deliver on this promise.

Pennsylvania's Pre-K Counts program has demonstrated the benefits to the 11,000 at-risk children it serves, and we have expanded Head Start services to address the unmet demand with a state supplement to federal funding. Most recently, Pennsylvania created a small but promising pilot program to serve the most vulnerable infants and toddlers, Keystone Babies. But for every child served in these initiatives, at least two children are denied access because of limited resources.

Therefore, the third and critical necessary step is to bring these proven strategies to scale in Pennsylvania. In a climate of economic crisis, it seems counter-intuitive to suggest that we spend more money on any public program. But clear and consistent data demonstrate that continuing to starve the early childhood education sector of needed resources is costing taxpayers far more in public spending than a sound investment in early learning ever will or could.

There is an immediate cost savings to school districts through lower special education and remedial education costs. Children who have had strong early learning experiences are more likely to graduate high school and go on to college. Longitudinal studies on the benefits of high-quality early education have followed children well into middle age, and not only do the positive results hold constant, but the economic return on investment

continues to mount as children get older, and on into adulthood in lower incarceration rates, higher earnings and reduced chronic health problems. The Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis (Grunewald and Rolnick 2007) has estimated that taxpayers save \$17 for every \$1 spent on high-quality early childhood education.

The additional cost of providing high-quality early care and education for every at-risk child under the age of five in the Commonwealth has been estimated by OCDEL at approximately \$1 billion more than current spending. This can be compared to the nearly \$2 billion spent on corrections each year. Given the savings that will accrue down the road, this seems like a wise investment.

Conclusion

The single biggest factor in determining how successful children will be in our system of public education is how well we equip them to succeed from the very beginning. Trying to compensate once they are in trouble is much more costly and much less effective than getting them off to a great start as early as possible. Including the child care system in the debate about how to fix public education provides a window of opportunity—not only for the system, but ultimately for the children it serves.

Real innovation in school reform requires that we stop looking for the keys where the light is good and dare to search in the dark where we know they really are. If we

continue to treat education as an endeavor that starts when children turn five years old, we will never achieve the kind of transformational change we all seek. Most importantly, we will continue to fail in closing the achievement gap for our most vulnerable children, denying them the opportunity to reach their fullest potential.

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