

INVESTING IN ALASKA'S YOUNG CHILDREN

Alaska Early Care and Learning: Public Policy Priorities for 2016

Research shows that participation in quality early childhood programs has long term gains for all children. Yet, only 1 in 5 children benefit from participation in some level of early childhood services. Moreover, science tells us that during the first three years of life the brain undergoes extraordinary development as children are acquiring the ability to think, speak, learn, and reason.

According to a statewide survey of 750 Alaskans conducted in September 2015, an overwhelming majority of Alaskans believe state funding for early childhood programs is important for the state's long-term prosperity.

Nearly three-quarters of the respondents (71%) said that in current tough economic times, they support investment of state funds in early childhood programs as a strategy for ensuring Alaska's long-term prosperity.

"In an era of tight government budgets... the real question is how to use the available funds wisely. The best evidence supports the policy prescription: Invest in the very young."

James J. Heckman
Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences



INVESTMENT PRIORITIES

QUALITY EARLY CARE

- Increase child care assistance rates to current market rates and update and revise family contribution scale.
- Provide equitable access to quality early care and education for working families.
- Maintain investment in Head Start and Pre-K programs to advance early learning opportunities for children.

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

- Invest in Parents as Teachers to strengthen parent knowledge of early childhood development and improve parenting practices.
- Maintain investment in Infant Learning Programs to continue to provide essential early intervention services to children with developmental disabilities/delays and children who experience abuse and/or neglect.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND EARLY LITERACY

- Increase investment in Best Beginnings to provide Imagination Library books to 50% of Alaska's young children, support locally based solutions, and promote parent and community engagement in early learning.



BEST BEGINNINGS
Alaska's Early Childhood Investment



Parents as Teachers
State Office



ALASKA'S EARLY CARE & LEARNING PROGRAMS

Child Care Assistance Rates

Child Care Assistance: Every week in Alaska, about 38,000 children under age 6 with working parents are in some type of child care setting. The availability, affordability, and quality of child care are challenges that working parents face. Alaska is one of 19 states where both the annual cost of center-based infant care and center-based preschool-age care exceed the annual cost of tuition and fees at 4-year state public colleges.

Research shows that early brain development, early language development, executive function ability, and effective staff practice (the interaction between staff and children that supports learning and high order thinking), have a direct connection to a child's healthy development and ultimate school success.

Beginning with provider payments that reflect the current market and then increasing payments related to high quality care will help ensure that parents have choices among quality providers.

QRIS: Learn & Grow

Progress toward development of a Quality Recognition and Improvement System, Learn & Grow: Thanks to funding support to thread, *Learn & Grow* is in development, and will provide a sustainable systematic approach to assess, recognize, reward and improve the level of quality in early care and learning programs. *Learn & Grow* sets standards of excellence for early care and learning programs and then provides a pathway to help programs continually improve to meet the higher standards.

Learn & Grow provides financial, training and technical assistance support for participating programs and serves as a bridge to bring together all early childhood programs under one vision of quality early care and learning. By providing public recognition of early care and learning quality, more parents and families will have access to information to make better informed decisions about the types of early care and learning programs best for their children.

Head Start and Pre-K Programs

Head Start and Pre-K Programs: According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) 2014 State of Preschool report, 42% of 4-year-old children across the United States are enrolled in either Head Start, State Pre-K, or a Special Education Program. In Alaska, we are far behind the national average, with only 23% of 4-year-olds participating in one of these three programs.

High quality Pre-K helps children start school ready to succeed. It reduces the likelihood that children will need remediation, special education, be retained a grade, and increases the likelihood that children will perform at or above grade level, graduate from high school and be college or career ready.

Helping Alaska's most vulnerable children and families prepare for success before they reach school age is a crucial investment that produces positive outcomes.

Infant Learning Programs

Infant Learning Programs (ILPs) ensure that early intervention services are available for families with infants and toddlers (birth to age 3) with special needs.

ILPs partner with grantees around the state to provide services directly to families at a local level. EI/ILP grantees include school districts, mental health associations, Alaska Native corporations, parent associations, and other nonprofit organizations. Service may include: developmental screening and evaluation; individualized family service plans to outline goals for the family and their child; child development information; home visits; physical, occupational or speech therapy; specialized equipment; and/or referrals to other needed services.

“A balanced approach to emotional, social, cognitive, and language development will best prepare all children for success in school and later in the workplace and community.”

Parents as Teachers (PAT) is an evidence-based, universal home visiting model that provides parent education and support to prenatal women and families with children between the ages of 0 and 5. Designed to respect parents as their child's first and most influential teachers, PAT enhances parent knowledge of child development, improves parenting practices, increases early detection of developmental delays, promotes safe and healthy relationships, and improves school readiness and success.

Families engage in personal visits, typically in their home, with certified parent educators; attend group socials; receive developmental health, hearing and vision screenings; and are linked to community resources. Parents who participate in PAT are more confident about their parenting and are more involved in their children's schooling.

PAT is currently offered in 18 Alaska communities, and served over 750 children during the 2014-2015 program year.

Best Beginnings

Best Beginnings: What happens in the first five years of life lays the foundation for success in school, and in life. Talking with young children is critical – and the earlier the better. Since a child's vocabulary at age 2 predicts later success in kindergarten, books make even more of a difference.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, in fourth-grade reading, Alaska ranks lower than 41 states and jurisdictions. Alaska's Imagination Libraries, supported by Best Beginnings and local communities, can help change this. Best Beginnings provides resources to Imagination

Libraries – matching funds, ongoing support, and training – according to approved plans. More than 21,000 children 0-5 in 105 Alaska communities receive a free book in the mail every month through Imagination Library. Evaluation results are positive. Best Beginnings' resources, like the website, TV spots, e-newsletters, *Babies on Track*, and Words Count, promote parent and community engagement in early learning. Best Beginnings and its partners promote activities recommended in the Alaska State Literacy Blueprint that was endorsed by the State Board of Education in 2011.

“It is critical to intervene early in life, in the crucial window when the brain is developing and the foundations for adult life are being laid.”

NICOLAS KRISTOF & SHERYL WUDUNN
A PATH APPEARS

THE OPPORTUNITY FOR LEARNING SHOULD BEGIN AT BIRTH

For more information about Alaska's Early Care and Learning Programs visit:

- **Alaska AEYC**
www.alaskaaeyc.org
- **Alaska Head Start Association**
www.akheadstart.org
- **Best Beginnings**
www.bestbeginningsalaska.org
- **Parents as Teachers Alaska Office**
www.ruralcap.com
- **Thread**
www.threadalaska.org

**\$2
billion**

Families earn \$2 billion as a result of available early care and learning services.

**\$512
million**

Alaska's early care and learning sector accounts for over half a billion dollars of economic activity.

**\$1 =
\$1.50**

For every dollar spent on early care and learning in Alaska, there is a \$1.50 in total economic activity.

In Alaska, about 7,000 children repeat a grade between kindergarten and high school. It is far more expensive to intervene during the K-12 years to help keep a child on track than it is to make an early investment to start children on track. Moreover, early care and learning activity in Alaska creates jobs for thousands of Alaskans; allows thousands more to participate in the workforce because care is available; and generates millions of dollars in spending by households and the public sector. This spending generates even more economic activity through related expenditures in communities throughout the state. Investment in families with young children is a social, economic, and education imperative for the future success of Alaska.



I was referred for early intervention services and now I'm developmentally on target.



My parents learn how to best support my growth and development during our home visits.



I have great teachers at my child care and Head Start. They like their jobs and know a lot about helping kids learn.



You should see all of my books at home! I am excited about learning and can't wait for kindergarten!



I'm graduating with honors because I had a good start in life.

ALASKA Early Childhood Advocacy Group

Our children, birth to five, are best served by a unified, sustainable system, a system including early care and learning, health, and family support. The **Alaska Early Childhood Advocacy Group** is a coalition of early childhood experts and leading organizations with representation across Alaska working to increase the number of children ready to succeed in school, and beyond. The following entities comprise the group: Alaska AEYC, Alaska Head Start Association, Alaska Infant Learning Program Association, Best Beginnings, Parents as Teachers State Office, and thread.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Create an Office of Early Learning to increase collaboration and coordination of programs and services for young children and their families, erasing bureaucratic barriers and ensuring greater efficiencies. With guidance from the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council (AECCC) appointed by the Governor, the Office would bring together programs and services funded and operated by the Department of Education & Early Development and the Department of Health & Social Services. Positions would be maintained where they are, thus promoting interconnections with other programs impacting families in both departments.

Develop a coordinated state early care and learning data system to improve program effectiveness, inform decisions, and help policymakers answer key questions. This system will be supported by policies and practices that encourage the coordination, security, and use of early care and learning data resulting in a quality-improvement-driven data system rather than a compliance-driven one.