



Bipartisan Policy Center

A Cohesive Vision for Child Care, Head Start, and Pre-K

Making Investments that Truly Transform
the Early Care and Education System



JUNE 2021

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Bipartisan Policy Center's Early Childhood Initiative is grateful to the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Heising-Simons Foundation, and the Buffett Early Childhood Fund for their generous support of our work.

We would especially like to thank to Beth Bye, Commissioner for the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, whose early thoughts on this topic informed much of our work.

The authors would like to acknowledge the Early Childhood Initiative staff, particularly Suzann Morris and Frannie Einterz, for their thoughtful contributions to this report.

Finally, we want to acknowledge the child care administrators, state-level public officials, and early childhood advocates who work tirelessly to weave together the various funding streams on behalf of providers, children and families around this country. We are grateful for the opportunity to learn from those on the ground and to elevate their experiences and recommendations within this report.

DISCLAIMER

The findings and recommendations expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views or opinions of BPC's founders or its board of directors.

Introduction

For the first time in half a century, federal policymakers are seriously considering significant investments in, and structural changes to, our nation's early care and education system. These long-overdue developments are potentially transformative for our country, simultaneously impacting two generations by allowing parents to work and support their families, while supporting children's educational and lifelong success. These investments would have wide-reaching impacts: Our economy and society are strengthened when families have access to affordable, high quality early care and education programs.

There could be no better investment than in our nation's early care and education programs, especially as we recover from the pandemic and get our economy back on track. Yet, successful public policy considerations are almost always more complex than they first appear. Recently, historic investments in the child care system from the COVID-19 relief packages have helped set the stage for reframing how we can best support our nation's working families and child care businesses.

Policymakers have an opportunity to build on the lessons learned over the last year and make real, long-lasting changes to improve our nation's early care and education system. Doing so will require a holistic approach and an understanding of how major policy changes might impact the existing system. Below are four recommendations that policymakers should consider when contemplating expanding early care and education programs at the federal level.

- 1. To support parent choice, early care and education programs must be offered in a variety of community-based settings including in centers, family child care homes, and faith-based providers.**
- 2. To reduce duplication, inconsistencies, and overlap, any federal funding should be administered by the Department of Health and Human Services, in coordination and collaboration with other federal agencies wherever appropriate.**
- 3. To ensure programs support the needs of working families, policymakers must pair funding with local flexibility and innovation.**
- 4. To ensure an adequate supply of care, especially for infants and toddlers, investments must recognize and support the child care business model.**

Our child care ecosystem provides support for nearly 60% of America's children under age five. Through a mixed delivery system of providers, parents can choose the setting that works best for their family, finances, work situation, values, and preferences. Most parents pay for child care, but through several federal programs, families are eligible for assistance in accessing and affording the care they need. Further, most states operate public Pre-K programs to prepare children for kindergarten, often at no charge to families, which collectively serve just over one-third of four-year-olds.¹

While parent choice in a mixed delivery system is paramount, the way these various programs are administered and operated can cause real inefficiencies within the system. At both the federal and state levels, multiple funding streams, eligibility systems, monitoring and oversight mechanisms, and reporting requirements all lead to bureaucratic inefficiencies. This lack of coordination creates obstacles for parents, and results in many children—often those who are already the most vulnerable—missing out on the support they need.

The federal government has made strides to better integrate federal early childhood programs, including with state Pre-K programs, which should serve as a model. For instance, the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five program is designed to help states coordinate and align their existing programs within the state's mixed delivery system. At the programmatic level, Early Head Start – Child Care Partnerships combine successful aspects of Head Start programs and child care providers, improving quality while retaining flexibility for local innovation and meeting the needs of working parents.

If our country is to truly support working parents and their children's healthy development, we must implement policies that better synchronize the entire early care and education system so that it works better for all involved. Instead of creating new programs with more duplicative purposes, policymakers should focus efforts on improving the availability and quality of early care and education programs—including through centers-, faith-, and home-based providers and Head Start programs. Recognizing that children are learning from birth, despite the setting, we must focus on improving quality across the system. Understanding the current child care landscape and developing a long-term vision for achieving positive outcomes will be critical if our country is to make real lasting reforms to support families and their children.

This paper will make the case for policymakers to consider investing in the entire early care and education system rather than create new structures that could further isolate programs—such as Pre-K—from the mixed delivery system.

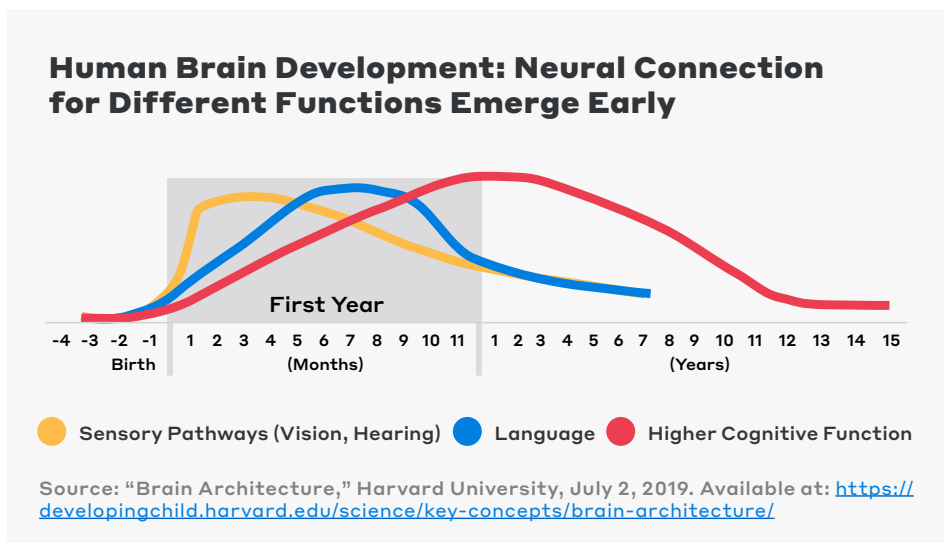
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Importance of Early Learning

A child's early education begins at birth and is influenced—either positively or negatively—by the quality of their environments, relationships, and experiences. The care every young child receives in the first few years of life—whether from a parent, family member, or child care professional—lays the groundwork for their healthy development, and ultimately, to reach their full potential.²

A child's earliest experiences affect the quality of their brain's architecture by establishing either a strong or fragile foundation for their learning and behavior later in life. Children's brains grow rapidly, largely establishing the foundation for physical, cognitive, and social capabilities before a child turns three.³ In fact, 90% of the brain develops before the age of five, with much of the growth happening within the first year of life. Just as a weak foundation compromises the quality and strength of a house, adverse experiences early in life can impair brain architecture, with long-term and negative effects that last into adulthood.⁴



High quality early care and education programs can help provide the right conditions for early childhood development, particularly in one's first three years. Studies have shown that high quality child care environments have a positive impact on language development at as early as two years old, with higher quality care predicting better language performance at age four, and lead to higher scores on math and reading tests.^{5,6} High quality caregiving is associated with better physical and mental health, fewer behavior problems, higher educational achievement, more productive employment, and less

involvement with social services and the criminal justice system in adulthood.^{7,8} Overall, high quality care during both the infant/toddler and preschool periods is associated with the best child outcomes at age five.⁹

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Unfortunately, too many children face inequities in their earliest years that set them behind their peers and may prevent them from ever catching up. For instance, by age three, children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may have exposure to 30 million fewer words than children from more affluent backgrounds.¹⁰ With children five and younger facing the highest poverty rates of all children (15.5% in 2019), many of the country's youngest children face harmfully high stress and adverse experiences that set them behind their peers and leave them unprepared for kindergarten.^{11,12} An absence of responsive caregiving—or if interactions between adult and child are unreliable or inappropriate—the child's brain's structure does not form as expected, which can lead to disparities in learning and behavior.¹³

“In order to get a return on investment, the first thing we need to do is invest” – Joy Spencer before the House Ways and Means Committee, April 2021

Creating the right conditions for early childhood development is critical for ensuring our nation's children are set up for success in life, and can grow up to be healthy, productive members of our communities. High quality child care is expensive, but the investment supports a skilled workforce for the future, decreases spending on social services, and yields robust returns. Intervening as early as possible, particularly for low-income and otherwise disadvantaged families, ensures the highest rate of return.¹⁴ We cannot achieve these results if we don't make investments in child care in the first place. Every child deserves an opportunity for a high quality early childhood environment—they only get one chance at this foundational period in their lives.

Early Care and Education Ecosystem

Parents are their child's first and most important teacher, and strong families are the building blocks of a healthy and productive society. Every day, parents make important decisions about who is caring for their children—whether they can provide that care themselves, or if they will rely on the help of a family member, friend, or a child care professional. While many parents would prefer to stay at home with their children during their child's earliest years, for many, this is simply not an option.¹⁵ Today, more than two-thirds of children under the age of five have all available parents in the workforce.¹⁶

Options for affordable early care and education increase the economic and general well-being of families, and can help families lift themselves out of poverty, all with positive outcomes for children. Below is a description of the largest components of the early care and education system: the child care market, Head Start, and state Pre-K programs.

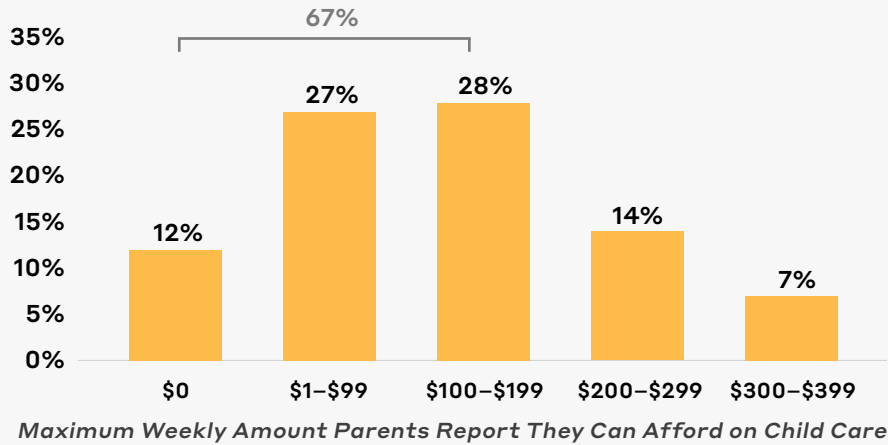
THE CHILD CARE MARKET

The child care market includes a diverse set of for-profit and nonprofit businesses, including large child care centers run by national or regional companies; child care provided in the owner's home (often referred to as family child care or home-based care); care provided in faith-based settings; and individual caregivers. In 2016, 675,000 child care providers—mostly women-owned small businesses—produced revenue of \$47.2 billion.¹⁷

This mixed delivery system ensures parents can choose the setting and caregiver that best meets their preferences and needs. Unfortunately, a lack of affordable, high quality child care reduces the choices parents have and cause them to make significant financial and lifestyle changes, including leaving the workforce or delaying having children.¹⁸

The demand for child care across our country greatly outpaces the supply, creating a significant gap in the availability of high quality and affordable options for parents. In 2019, BPC conducted an analysis of the supply and potential demand for child care across 25 states and found an average of almost one in three children of working parents may lack access to care in their community.¹⁹ The supply has only further declined as a result of the pandemic.

Two-thirds of parents say the maximum amount their household can afford for child care each week per child is less than \$200



Source: Bipartisan Policy Center, *Parent Preferences, Are They Changing?*, January 22, 2021. Available at: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/event/parent-child-care-preferences-are-they-changing/>.

Child care often costs more than parents can afford. Across BPC’s four parent surveys, over half of parents consistently said finding care within their budget is difficult to find, and lower-income parents more likely to respond this way.²⁰ Approximately two-thirds of parents (67%) report the maximum weekly amount they can afford to pay for child care is less than \$200 per child, or \$10,400 annually—including more than a quarter (27%) of parents who said the most they could afford was \$100 per week and 12% saying they can afford nothing at all.²¹ These responses indicate parents can afford tuition amounts that are considerably less than the cost of high quality child care in many states.

Child care businesses generate most of their income from tuition fees. Therefore, to fill capacity, programs often charge tuition based on what parents can pay, which is not equal to the true cost of providing high quality child care services. For example, cost modeling by the District of Columbia found a program’s estimated cost of delivering child care services was frequently more than the program received in revenue, and this gap was the largest for small programs that mostly served infants and toddlers.²² Several components drive the cost of providing child care, including rent and utilities, materials and administration, food, and personnel. Child care is a labor-intensive service, so staffing costs, including salaries and benefits, are by the far the largest budget item for child care programs.

Child Care Program Budget	
Salaries	60–80%
Occupancy	10–20%
Food Program	5–15%
Other	5–20%

To ensure high safety and quality of care, providing care for infants and toddlers requires smaller adult-to-child ratios than for preschool-aged children. The income generated from an infant or toddler classroom may not be enough to meet the labor costs of staffing that room, especially if there are vacancies for any part of the year. Conversely, if businesses follow the recommended and widely accepted adult-to-child ratios developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the tuition from a preschool classroom can be more than double that of an infant room, but the staffing needs are significantly less.²³

Age Category	Ratio Adult:Child
Infant (<i>Birth to 1.5 years</i>)	1:4
Toddler (<i>1 to 2.5 years</i>)	1:6
Preschool (<i>2.5 to 5 years</i>)	1:10

To stay in business, child care providers charge parents with younger children more. Therefore, the ongoing struggle to find affordable and available child care is markedly worse for parents with infants and toddlers, with annual costs being as much as \$24,000 in some areas of the country—more than double what most parents said they can afford to pay for one child.

Another way many child care businesses help keep costs down is to rely on a mixed-age program to balance costs and expenses. Businesses can offset the losses from operating infant and toddler classrooms by serving more preschool-aged children. This means that many providers have more space for preschool children and less space for infants or toddlers. With a federal push for universal Pre-K, many child care providers will close their doors because they simply cannot make ends meet with income from parents of infants and toddlers only. As referenced above, only the wealthiest parents can afford to pay the actual cost of high quality care, especially for infants and toddlers.

The high costs of labor paired with the inability for parents to pay the true cost of providing care also means providers are forced to squeeze staff wages to keep their businesses afloat. Across the country, 2 million individuals are employed in the early childhood industry, with a median hourly pay in 2020 of \$12.24 an hour, or \$25,460 a year, which is below the federal poverty rate for a family of four, at \$26,200 in 2020.²⁴

As we've written before, though recent policy proposals have considered raising wages of the early childhood workforce, it is important to note the potential impacts this could have on the industry that underscore the flaws in the child care market.²⁵ Namely, lawmakers must grapple with the most critical dilemma the industry faces: how to provide working families the affordable care they need while paying child care workers a living wage.

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For more than 80 years, the federal government has invested in early care and education programs to help parents afford care and promote their child's development.²⁶ Over time, these programs have varied in intent, scope, and design, and have evolved in response to changes such as the expansion of women in the workforce, a better understanding of early childhood brain development, and changes in societal beliefs and values.²⁷

Today, the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) supports low-income working families by supporting parents' ability to work or participate in an education or training system. Through the program, families may receive a voucher to help their child attend a program of their choice, but due to low funding, less than 20% of federally eligible families receive support.²⁸ Additionally, the subsidy rates are often based on distorted market rates that do not reflect what it costs to provide child care, further exacerbating the gap between a providers' income and the costs they must incur to provide high quality services.²⁹

Though the pandemic highlighted the fragility of the child care market, the delicate balance that providers must manage in order to stay in business is not new.

HEAD START

The federal government funds early care and education programs directly through the Head Start program, which has three components. Head Start has provided services for low-income three- and four-year-old children and their families since 1965, while both Early Head Start and Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships (EHS-CCP) are intended to support infants, toddlers, and their families. Nearly three in four (72%) program participants are aged three or four. Funding is subject to the annual appropriations process; in fiscal year 2021, Congress appropriated \$10.8 billion for the program. Children from families with incomes below the federal poverty level are eligible for services, but funding only serves about 45% of eligible children.

Head Start programs are an important part of the early care and education system, but largely distinct from the child care market and from state Pre-K programs in their purpose, design, funding, and administration. Head Start is not a market-based system, nor is it part of the public Pre-K system: The federal government distributes Head Start funds directly to programs at the local level through grants and partnerships, bypassing the state. The Office of Head Start within HHS administers funding and oversees 1,600 public, nonprofit, and for-profit agencies that provide Head Start and EHS services to more than 1 million young children.

Grantees typically receive a base grant award, which supports a certain number of slots, and grantees must contribute a 20% match from nonfederal sources to receive their full award. In most cases, Head Start programs have received grants in perpetuity in the communities where they were first established. Only in 2011 was a system established to determine whether programs' quality and ability to meet program requirements would qualify them for continued Head Start funding, though a small number of grants have gone through the "recompetition" process.³⁰

Head Start. Head Start programs served more than 750,000 children in 2019.³¹ Nearly all (89%) of Head Start services are provided in center-based settings that, based on local design, vary in their number of days per week and hours per day. For the past two decades, Head Start center-based programs have been required to meet a minimum service duration of 3.5 hours per day, four days per week, for 128 days per year—or an equivalent of 448 annual hours. Just 30% of Head Start center-based programs offer services for more than 1,020 hours annually (and most operate for eight months, aligned with the school year). In comparison, the IRS defines full-time work as at least 30 hours per week, or 130 hours per month—almost three and a half times the required service duration of Head Start programs.

In an attempt to rectify this and meet the reality of the full-day needs of working parents, in 2016, OHS revised the regulations governing these programs to require Head Start programs to extend the duration of their services to provide 1,020 annual hours of care over the course of eight months per year. While this change still wouldn't meet the needs of working parents, it would have been a step in the right direction. Phasing in full-day, full-school-year services was rescinded due to insufficient funding to support implementation without a significant loss to the number of children who could be served.³²

Head Start rules require at least half of teachers nationwide—including all center-based teachers—to have a bachelor's degree in child development, early childhood education, or equivalent coursework.³³ Assistant teachers, home visitors, and family development associates (required for family child care programs) are required to have a minimum of a Child Development Associate, or CDA, credential.



Early Head Start. Like Head Start, EHS grants are awarded to local community organizations. Early Head Start programs served almost 240,000 pregnant women, infants, and toddlers under the age of three, and their families, in 2019.³⁴ Participants receive intensive and comprehensive early childhood development and family support services designed to foster healthy relationships between parent and child through home-visiting services, family child care providers, or center-based services. Despite being the preferred option for many families, only about one in three (34%) EHS programs were offered in a home-based environment.

Unlike Head Start, Early Head Start programs are full-year programs. Family child care providers and centers participating in Early Head Start generally offer 1,380 annual hours of classroom operations, compared with the Head Start requirement of 448, or even the goal of 1,020. Early Head Start is also more flexible than Head Start; for example, a program that is designed to meet the needs of parents enrolled in school may align its schedule with that of local schools, and then provide home-based services during the summer break when a parent is home.

Through the EHS-CCP, child care providers receive, on average, twice the funding they would have received using the CCDBG vouchers exclusively.

Requirements for staff are slightly more relaxed than in Head Start programs; specifically, center-based EHS staff must have at least a CDA with a focus on infant and toddler development.

Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships. Created by Congress in 2014, EHS-CCP is an attempt to expand access to high quality infant and toddler care for low-income working families while improving the quality and stability of child care

programs. Grantees can include states, cities, and nonprofit agencies. Through the program, Head Start providers partner with local child care businesses, which agree to meet Head Start Program Performance Standards; in exchange, the child care partners receive additional funds and a rich array of resources, coaching, and technical assistance to improve the quality of their services. The goal is to increase per-child funding for infants and toddlers in child care programs to a level commensurate with per-child funding in Early Head Start. The partnership program is also designed to provide enough flexibility for local innovation while ensuring a base level of accountability for public money and guaranteeing all children access to a base level of quality. Through the EHS-CCP, child care providers receive, on average, twice the funding they would have received using the CCDBG vouchers exclusively.³⁵

While Head Start is a critically important service that provides immense value to many families around the country, it is important to recognize the limitations inherent in the program's design that prevent it from being fully responsive to working families' needs or fully integrated into the early care and education system.

STATE PRE-K PROGRAMS

State-funded Pre-K programs for four-year-olds (and, in some cases, three-year-olds) have become an increasingly important part of our nation's early care and education system over the last few decades. Today, most states operate a Pre-K program separate from the child care market and offer enrollment free to eligible families through public funding sources.

In 2019, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) identified 47 states that had at least one preschool program serving three- to five-year-olds, most of which exist to prepare vulnerable children for kindergarten.³⁶ An analysis by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), found that in the 2019-2020 school year, 44 states and the District of Columbia operated public programs with a distinct purpose of preparing children for kindergarten, collectively serving about one-third of four-year-olds at a total annual cost of just over \$9 billion.³⁷

Separate from the child care market, which is mostly funded by parent's tuition, most state Pre-K programs receive general fund appropriations, subject to the state legislative budgeting process.³⁸ Local governments are also investing at the county, city, or even district level. For example, Denver and San Antonio offer Pre-K through sales tax revenues, Seattle through a property tax, and Philadelphia through a tax on soda.³⁹

Most public Pre-K programs are tuition-free for families, presenting a compelling option for those struggling to find and afford high quality child care. Unfortunately, the system is not set up in a way that all families can benefit, and in most states, access to Pre-K is limited. In the 2019-2020 school year,

according to NIEER, just eight states served more than 50% of four-year-olds. Only Florida and the District of Columbia operate truly universal programs—in these states, any child of appropriate age can enroll in public Pre-K. Seven additional states have programs that many consider to be universal.⁴⁰

Because the intent of public Pre-K programs is early education, the structure and schedule of most programs are relatively rigid and aligned with the K-12 school system. Public Pre-K programs are typically offered in school-based settings, and aligned with the school-day and school-year schedule, not providing the full-day and full-year care that working parents need. Only four states (NJ, NC, OK, and WV) and the District of Columbia spend enough to pay for high quality, full-day Pre-K (according to benchmarks set by NIEER), and even in these states, parents may still struggle to find care during the summer months. Other studies have found that less than half (42%) of early education centers nationwide serving three- to five-year-olds are open at least 30 hours per week.⁴¹ This is despite the fact that many children live with a parent working a nonstandard work schedule.⁴²

In addition to timing restrictions, nearly all Pre-K classrooms are located within, and operated by, the public school system. This does not offer parents much choice in terms of setting or location that might work best for their needs or offer the diversity in curriculum or instruction that the early childhood market does. Some states do attempt to blend their public Pre-K funding with the state's early care and education system. At least 13 states and D.C. allow community-based organizations to participate in the state's Pre-K program at varying levels.⁴³ In New Jersey, private providers and Head Start programs can contract with 25 of the state's 584 school districts to provide services through the state's Preschool Expansion program (formerly the well-known high quality Abbott preschool program).⁴⁴

Across Georgia, state-funded Pre-K programs are offered in a variety of settings: public schools; for-profit and nonprofit child care and early learning centers; military bases, and faith-based organizations. More than half of the 80,000 children served through this program in the 2016–2017 school year were enrolled in a private community-based setting.

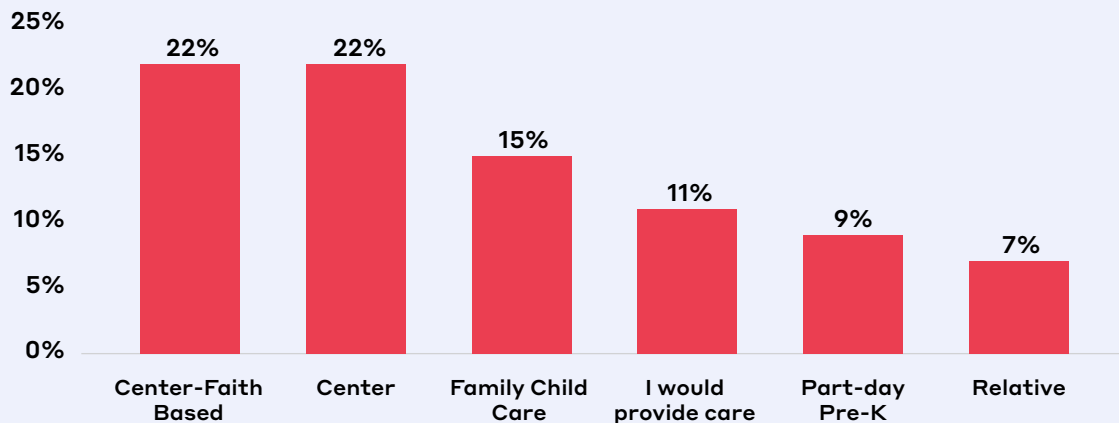
States also spend nearly \$200 million to supplement Head Start, and several state-funded programs mirror Head Start to enroll additional children or offer more hours of care per day.⁴⁵ When considering the enrollment of three- and four-year-olds in both Head Start and state Pre-K programs, almost half (44%) were enrolled in 2020.

Pre-K programs do, for the most part, meet their stated intent of helping to prepare children for school and success later in life. However, for many working parents and their children, Pre-K is not an adequate solution to the high costs and lack of child care in communities across the country.

Parent Preferences

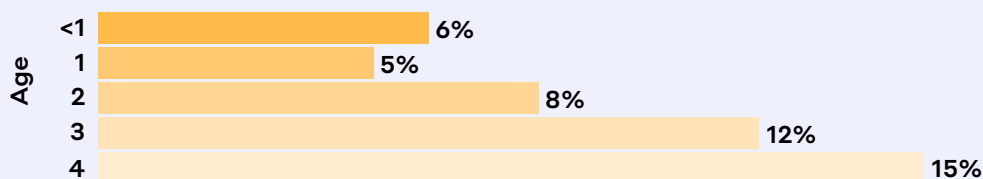
Efforts to improve the child care system—whether at the federal, state, or local level—must be centered around parents' priorities for child care. This requires a concerted effort to identify the needs and preferences of parents with young children, and understand how the existing child care system both meets these needs and where it falls short. The results of our national parent surveys provide key insights into parents' needs and preferences as well as how child care access affects families and our economy.

Ideal child care arrangements among parents paying for child care if all were equally priced and accessible



- ✓ A majority of parents have consistently said it is difficult to find care within their budget, with lower-income families having a greater challenge.
- ✓ Most parents need full-time care. Two-thirds of parents paid for 30 or more hours of child care each week, and a majority (60%) prefer care closer to home.
- ✓ The mixed delivery system is critical, and ideal arrangements differ by age of child. Both faith-affiliated child care centers and family child care programs are important components of the child care system, with many parents preferring these options.
- ✓ Parents with a younger child are more likely to say providing care themselves is their ideal arrangement, while parents with an older child are more likely to prefer a child care center.

Percent of Parents who Prefer a Part-Day Pre-K Program by Age of Child



Inefficiencies in Administration of the System

Today, the bulk of early care and education programs are housed within the Departments of Health and Human Services, Education, Agriculture, and the Interior.⁴⁶ At the state level, a variety of agencies are responsible for administering various early care and education programs and distributing funds. Decisions about agency administration and groupings of related programs within the same agency have very real implications. For example, each funding stream (federal and state) has its own eligibility, monitoring, and quality requirements. When programs are grouped together, it is easier for agencies to align requirements to promote efficiency. When multiple agencies are involved, coordination, collaboration, and oversight (program monitoring) can be more challenging and less efficient.

Integration and alignment are not merely an academic exercise of organizational efficiency, but can be essential to the everyday lives of families with young children who too often have trouble determining what services they might be eligible for and how to access them.

These bureaucratic inefficiencies create real obstacles for families to access services, and may lead to children—often those who are already the most vulnerable—missing out on the support they need. When families apply to multiple programs, housed at different agencies with different eligibility criteria, they are frequently asked to fill out duplicative paperwork. Instead of filling out form after form, some parents get frustrated and give up. Integration and alignment are not merely an academic exercise of organizational efficiency, but can be essential to the everyday lives of families with young children who too often have trouble determining what services they might be eligible for and how to access them.

Concerns about excessive fragmentation, overlap, and lack of coordination in the federal government's approach to early child development has been a feature of policy discussions going back to the 1990s, even as Congress continued

to authorize and fund new programs. In 1994, Congress requested that the nonpartisan GAO examine issues of governance and coordination. Since its first report on this topic, in 1996, the GAO has published six follow-up studies. Its most recent report, in 2017, found that the federal government has had some success in reducing fragmentation and overlap in these programs, but the lack of full integration of early childhood programs still exists.⁴⁷

From 2011 to 2017, HHS and the Department of Education (ED) co-chaired an Early Learning Interagency Policy Board to define joint goals, track progress, and work to bridge organizational cultures through common definitions and terminology. Other formal efforts to increase cross-agency collaboration have expanded in recent years. The 2007 reauthorization of the Head Start Act required states to establish or designate a state advisory council in part to identify opportunities for, and barriers to, collaboration and coordination among early care and education programs. Additional legislative efforts of integration at the federal level are detailed in the next section.

States, for their part, generally have wide latitude in deciding how to administer their funds from CCDBG, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and other federal programs. Conversely, the state role in Head Start is minimal, but each state has a Head Start Collaboration Office (separate from the state advisory councils mentioned above) to facilitate partnerships between Head Start and other state programs.

BPC conducted a review of states' approaches to delivering and organizing early childhood services, and ranked states based on several measures of programmatic governance and integration, such as the number of state agencies involved in administering programs and whether funding streams were split across agencies. Though states' approaches to delivering and organizing early education services varies, states that scored the highest in our ranking system were those that had consolidated program administration in fewer agencies—typically two to three, rather than three to four. The highest-scoring states had a single agency administer funds from the largest federal programs and the state's Pre-K program(s).⁴⁸ Our analysis found only 12 states housed CCDBG, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and the state's Pre-K program within the same agency.

Examples of Federal Coordination

As noted, in its most recent report on overlap and duplication of the early care and education system, the GAO found that the federal government has made some progress in reducing fragmentation and overlap in these programs.⁴⁹ There are several examples of successful federal efforts to better integrate the early care and education system across the birth through five continuum. These efforts should be models to promote increased collaboration between the siloed systems that currently exist.

Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge. The Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge, or RTT-ELC, offered between fiscal year (FY) 2011 and FY2013, was jointly administered by the Departments of Education and HHS. It was intended to help states build comprehensive statewide systems to support high quality preschool programs and expand access to preschool for high-need children. States that received awards were required to coordinate work across state agencies involved in administering early learning and development programs, including CCDBG, state-funded Pre-K, home visiting, and supports for children with disabilities. Nine states received grants in 2011 (for a total of \$500 million), five states in 2012 (\$133 million), and six states in 2013 (\$370 million).

Early Head Start – Child Care Partnerships. As noted above, the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership initiative at HHS combines aspects of Early Head Start and child care programs through layering of funding to provide comprehensive and continuous services to low-income infants, toddlers, and their families. The model is intended to demonstrate that coordination and collaboration among these two programs can improve the quality of the services they provide, while providing enough flexibility for local innovation. This program continues to be funded by Congress through the annual appropriations process.

Preschool Development Grants. The first iteration of the Preschool Development Grant program was intended to build off the RTT-ELC grants program to accomplish similar goals—expanding access to high quality preschool programs. This program was operated by ED in coordination with HHS, and was intended to lay the groundwork for a “Preschool for All” program, which would have made high quality preschool available for all four-year-olds. Between fiscal years 2014-2016, a total of 18 states received grants, either for *development* (for states with small or no state Pre-K program) or *expansion* (for states with a more robust Pre-K program) grants, with a general focus on expanding access for four-year-olds from low-income families.

In December 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act authorized a new Preschool Development Grant – Birth through Five program jointly administered by HHS and ED that is currently in operation. This iteration differs because it is focused on supporting states in coordinating and aligning their existing programs within their early care and education mixed delivery systems rather than focus on expanding services. Under the program, states may pursue a range of activities to align and strengthen existing funding streams, coordinate delivery models, improve the use of existing resources, encourage partnerships among providers and stakeholders, and maximize parental choice in a mixed delivery system to look holistically at the needs of young children and families. In FY2019, 46 states and territories received a PDG B-5 Initial Grant Award, and the following fiscal year, another six states and territories followed, and 23 states were awarded three-year Renewal Grants. The PDG B-5 has been funded at \$275 million since FY2020.

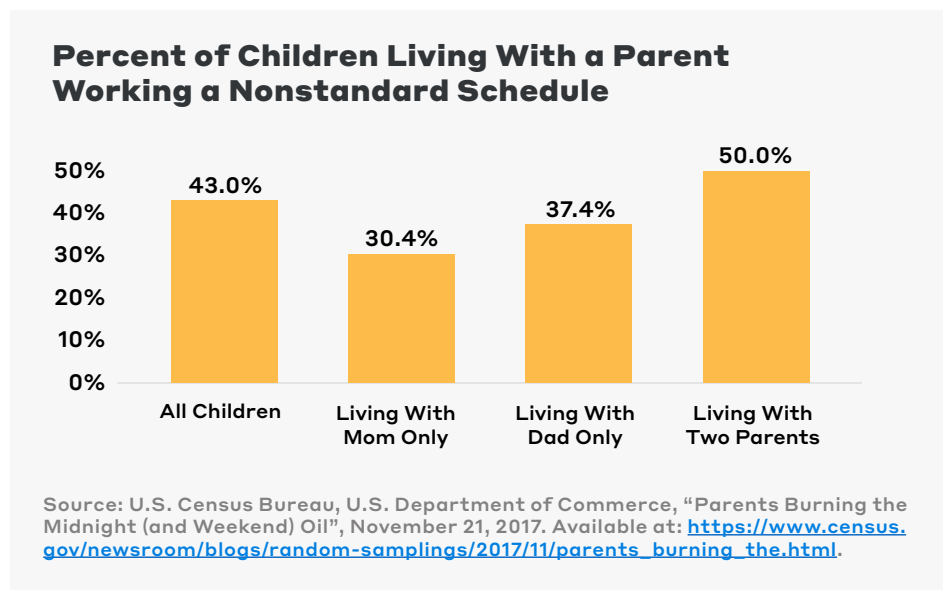
Unintended Consequences of Universal Pre-K

Our country’s early care and education system is a patchwork of programs at the federal, state, and local levels, in market-based systems and operated directly by public entities. Today, these layers of programs and funding streams have resulted in a maze of programs that parents, providers, and policymakers have difficulty navigating and understanding. At a time when demand for early care and education services continues to far outpace available resources, the case for continued and even expanded investment must be accompanied by a commitment to efficiency, good governance, and a consistent focus on improving quality for best results.

Our existing fragmented and siloed systems have contributed to a pervasive, false narrative that “child care” and “early education” are separate fields, and that the purposes of child care and Pre-K programs do not overlap. Unfortunately, policymakers have largely overlooked the fact that children are both cared for and educated beginning at birth no matter the care setting or caregiver.

While a universal Pre-K proposal would have tremendous positive benefits for many children ages three to five, it could have a wider negative impact on the entire child care system and working parents. Recent efforts to expand public Pre-K programs for four-year-olds have created challenges for child care providers who once balanced their costs by serving a mix of younger and older children.^{50,51}

Destabilization of the child care system could negatively impact working parents with children of all ages. Those with preschool-aged children might be diverted into a system that does not meet their needs, values, or preferences. As noted, the vast majority of Pre-K programs do not align with the typical work day, potentially forcing parents to cobble together multiple care arrangements. Many parents do not have access to, or the ability to, pick up their child from their Pre-K program and transport them to a child care program for the rest of their workday. Further, the lack of choice in setting, values, and curriculum may not provide parents with their preferred options. All of this will be particularly true for many families—particularly the lowest-income families—who need care for the hours beyond the typical Pre-K program, and even beyond the traditional 9-5 workday.⁵²



Parents of infants and toddlers may see the cost of their child care rise exorbitantly if the older children leave the child care system, because businesses will have no other way of keeping costs down. The lack of accessible infant care already correlates with lower workforce participation among parents of infants, but further destabilization could only deepen the gap of available, affordable infant and toddler child care across our country, and have broader impacts for workers, businesses, and our economy.



Most child care providers around this country are **small businesses**, whose income is comprised of the tuition parents pay to enroll their children.



Most of a child care business' budget goes to paying staff salaries. Parents **cannot afford** to pay the true cost of high quality care, so providers work with **tight budget margins**. They make ends meet through offering more classrooms for older children and keeping salaries low, a **delicate financial balance**.



Any external change to the market, such as expanding Pre-K programs, could **upend the business model** and cause costs for infant and toddler care to soar.

At a time when our entire early care and education system and parents need support, focusing on programs for one age group or purpose without recognizing how these policies would impact the rest of the system is unwise. Instead of further bifurcating early care and education programs, policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels should focus their efforts on how to better support the needs of working parents while simultaneously improving the availability, quality, and affordability of child care around our country.



Views of Child Care Providers

On April 23, 2021, BPC held a roundtable with independently owned child care businesses. During the discussion, panelists were asked, “What are your thoughts as the country moves forward in terms of any implementation on Pre-K in the birth through five system?” Their responses, edited for length, are as follows, and show the potential impacts a universal Pre-K system might have on parents and providers, as well as an example for how community partnerships could work.

Jessica Quinn, Owner and Director, Happy Hours Learning Center, Aberdeen, NJ

“We are a small center... what this will do to us honestly... is it will basically put me out of business. It could completely shut us down.” When discussing Pre-K expansion in New Jersey, she described leaders “never gave [child care providers] a seat at the table to show we are capable and we can be a part of ... some part of a solution for universal Pre-K. We are a 4-star-rated center, we have curriculum, we have worked really hard to get that rating and I believe that community providers need to all come together and be a part of [universal Pre-K].” Regarding the impacts on parents, she said, “Mixed delivery is super important and parents need to be able to choose where they want their kids to go. I don’t see why we don’t get to be part of that.”

NaRhea Salzbrenner, Owner and Director, Birdie’s Nest Child Care Center, Davenport, IA

“We have a universal preschool program in my center. I run it because I’m a licensed teacher and have my bachelor’s degree.” A family can “enroll in universal preschool at Birdie’s Nest, which is where the kiddos are comfortable. We get monthly funding from the school district. It’s not a huge amount, but we get the curriculum, resources, [and] special education support services.” This program has been a “really amazing community partnership because my parents—the preschoolers we have now were newborn babies when we very first opened... didn’t want to send them somewhere brand new. They wanted to continue preschool with us.” In terms of recommendations: “I’m hoping that more places do open up partnerships to community child care centers, especially if they do have someone with a degree. The parents were so thrilled they didn’t have to transition care from us to a preschool to kindergarten, so with us it’s just seamless... We’re a bridge for the parent and the school district.”

Rheitta Ohene-Amoako, Executive Director, Learning Hive, Lawrenceville, GA

Rheitta’s experience in Georgia is that, despite community partnerships, “It’s mainly larger child care centers, because in order to have a state-funded preschool program, you have to have a classroom big enough to hold 20 kids.” Smaller, independent centers like Rheitta’s don’t have that capacity. But she believes this is important for parents who think, “I’m comfortable with this center, with this program, and I’d like my children to continue.” Yet she knows the challenge of child care costs make Pre-K compelling. “Because of the cost of child care, when that child turns 4, and that parent has the option to pick a free Pre-K program... they would rather go for free. Sometimes it’s not what they want, but because it’s free, they go for it because it cuts back on their expenses.” She worries most about parents and their options. “My biggest thing is for the families, for the parents to have choice... [they say] I want my child to stay in the program he’s been at for 3 years already since he was an infant... So I think if the parents have a choice, they should be supported in that choice.”

Learn more here: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/event/supporting-small-child-care-businesses-during-covid-19-roundtable-discussion/>

Concluding Recommendations

In 2019, more than two-thirds of children under the age of six had all available caregivers in the workforce.⁵³ Working parents need a safe place for their children to be cared for and educated for the duration of their workday. The positive impacts of investments in our early care and education system are well-documented and exist in the lived experiences of millions of families and children.

Expanding Pre-K aligned with the public school system will not be a panacea for children and families. If our country is to truly support working parents and the healthy development of children, we must seek ways to better synchronize the entire early care and education system so that it works better for all involved. Beginning at birth, supporting the needs of working parents, and providing enough options for parents to make the choices they want are all paramount principles in our nation's early care and education system that we cannot ignore.

As policymakers debate structural changes to our nation's early care and education system, below are four recommendations they must address.

- 1. To support parent choice, early care and education programs must be offered in a variety of community-based settings including in centers, family child care homes, and faith-based providers.**

Center-, faith- and home-based settings are often the preferred setting for many parents, and may be more conducive to a child's needs and wrap-around services for children and families in the greatest need. Funding should not be limited to one setting, but rather maintain options for familiar community settings that are accessible and preferable to working families.

- 2. To reduce duplication, inconsistencies, and overlap, any federal funding should be administered by the Department of Health and Human Services, in coordination and collaboration with other federal agencies wherever appropriate.**

HHS administers the main federal early care and education programs and has the expertise to support the healthy development of children. Where appropriate, HHS should coordinate with other federal agencies working on behalf of children, families, and parents, to ensure families can access the holistic supports they need to thrive. As evidenced by the PDG program, joint administration can be an effective option for supporting collaboration and coordination at the federal and state level.

3. To ensure programs support the needs of working families, policymakers must pair funding with local flexibility and innovation.

It is critical that parents have access to enough care to work, and two-thirds of parents require more than 30 hours of care each week. As described, pairing federal funding with local flexibility and promoting coordination and collaboration ensures programs can meet the unique needs of families and communities while offering high quality services.

4. To ensure an adequate supply of care, especially for infants and toddlers, investments must recognize and support the child care business model.

As evidenced by the pandemic, there is a real need to support the stabilization of child care businesses beyond the subsidy system. Child care is a market-based system—upending a portion of the business model, including removing a large portion of the “consumer” base (three- and four-year olds), could have unintended consequences that may further destabilize the industry. It is important to both support child care businesses and work to drive down the cost of care, particularly for infants and toddlers.

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