



Early Childhood Initiative

Early Learning Facilities Policy Framework

Overview

Safe and developmentally appropriate early care and learning programs are an essential component of building healthy and economically sustainable communities in which families and young children thrive. Physical environment, however, is one important feature of program quality that is often overlooked. The physical indoor and outdoor spaces where young children learn, play, and grow contribute to their cognitive development and social, emotional, and physical well-being. To achieve the goal of providing every child with access to developmentally appropriate care, the United States must ensure that the policies and systems governing and funding early care and learning have a robust facilities component. The following framework articulates major principles that are critical to the development of policies, strategies, and standards for early learning facility investments.

Throughout this document BPC uses the term “early learning facilities” to refer to all types of out-of-home settings used for child care and early education. This includes child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start facilities, and part-day preschools.

Image source: Low Income Investment Fund – Photo of Children’s Village Child Development Center, located in San Francisco, CA.



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Background

THE SCOPE OF THE FACILITIES PROBLEM

Children attend early learning programs in a variety of settings, including center-based programs and in-home family child care—settings where young children learn, play, and grow. Approximately 129,000 center-based early care and education programs (including Head Start) serve nearly 7 million children in the United States, and 1 million in-home providers care for 2.7 million children.¹ Yet, many children are placed in settings that do not promote their early learning and expose them to health and safety issues. In addition, some early learning programs are housed in repurposed facilities that were not designed with the needs of young children in mind, and many communities lack access to early learning facilities entirely.

Young children spend much of their time in early learning facilities, yet a national needs assessment on the safety and quality of early learning facilities has yet to be conducted. However, a number of recent analyses point to the magnitude of the challenge.

- Children are extremely vulnerable to environmental issues, such as lead, mold, dust, and other environmental pollutants, and exposure can have long-term health and developmental consequences. The 2011 Massachusetts Infrastructure Inventory found excessive levels of carbon dioxide in early learning facilities, as well as insufficient ventilation systems, and furnishings that contained formaldehyde.² The Environmental Protection Agency has also found that approximately 500,000 child care facilities are not even regulated for lead in drinking water.³
- Young children have frequent hand-to-mouth activity, meaning that substances on floors, carpets, window sills, and elsewhere have a high likelihood of being ingested. Safety hazards also include easily accessible electrical outlets, unsafe drinking water, unsafe play equipment, and open windows and gates.⁴
- An investigation in 10 states conducted by the U.S. Health and Human Services Office of the Inspector General found that 96 percent of child care inspected during unannounced visits had one or more potentially hazardous conditions and noncompliance with health and safety requirements.⁵



Image source: *Children of the Rising Sun*, located in Detroit, MI, provided by IFF.

- Early learning facilities, if not designed with the purpose of serving the developmental needs of young children, may have structural issues that can hinder healthy and hygienic practices, such as handwashing. Specifically, the Massachusetts study found that nearly three-quarters of classrooms surveyed lacked sinks.⁶ A 2014 needs assessment of Rhode Island's early learning facilities found that 37 percent of centers lacked separate sinks for food preparation and diaper-changing.⁷

In addition to needing improved facilities to meet the developmental needs of young children, there are areas where the supply of licensed child care is very low. Child care deserts are common; a study of licensed child care centers and homes across 22 states found that roughly half of Americans reside in a child care desert, leaving these communities without many child care and early education options. This issue is especially pronounced for low-income rural communities and areas with higher populations of Hispanic and Native American families.⁸

DEFINING THE NEED

A substantial investment is required simply to upgrade existing facilities. While exact estimates are difficult to determine without a nationwide needs assessment, the National Children's Facilities Network estimates that \$10 billion would be required to upgrade all early learning facilities to professional-quality standards,⁹ and at least \$17 billion would be required to bring existing early learning facilities up to best-practice standards.¹⁰ Similarly, a Federal Head Start Facilities Report profiled thousands of Head Start centers and found that it would cost an estimated \$1.1 billion to update the 2,201 centers that need improvement to address poorly maintained or unclean

environments, lack of preparedness for fire and other emergencies, and other potential safety hazards.¹¹

THE CASE FOR INVESTING IN EARLY LEARNING FACILITIES

Early learning facilities are directly related to promoting children’s development, health, and safety, as well as teacher effectiveness and productivity. Environmental factors such as good indoor air quality, proper ventilation, natural light, and the absence of contaminants and toxins lead to better health outcomes. The physical configuration of the space itself as well as fixtures within the space play an important role in keeping children safe and healthy, including bathrooms adjacent to classrooms, sinks inside the classrooms to promote handwashing, and child-sized counters, furnishings, and fixtures. These elements reduce the demands on teachers and increase children’s autonomy and competence. Early learning spaces with well-resourced classrooms support play and exploration and help foster staff retention by using teachers’ time more efficiently. Auxiliary space for the needs of teaching

staff, such as preparation and storage areas and adult-sized bathrooms, help create a supportive workplace environment that enhances job performance and satisfaction.¹³

Despite what is known about the impact of early learning spaces—both home-based and center-based—on the health, safety, and development of young children, there are no dedicated funding sources to support the development of well-designed facilities. If the federal, state, and local governments want to promote positive child development for all children and families, dedicated investments in high-performing facilities must be part of the overall strategy.

It is important to note that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Demographics, the changing nature of work, economic conditions, transportation, age, and current availability of facilities all play a role. The issues confronting rural communities differ from those faced by larger metropolitan areas. Rural areas are particularly challenged because too often the supply of care is also linked to other rural economic challenges, such as the lack of high-speed internet or cell service.



Image source: Delaware Child Development.

Early Learning Facilities Principles

The following principles should guide policies, strategies, and standards for early learning facilities investments.

1. Early learning programs are critical to the health and success of local communities and the national economy.

Every child deserves equal access to affordable, developmentally appropriate, high-performing early learning facilities. Investing in children is both a moral and economic imperative. Every child—regardless of socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, or any other demographic factor—deserves a start in life that sets them on a path to achieve their full potential. Families in rural areas, in particular, experience distinct challenges, and their needs require dedicated and specialized attention, such as the inclusion of child care as part of local economic-development plans.

To ensure equitable investments in early learning facilities, the following factors must be included:

Assessment of Need. A national assessment that documents the current condition of early learning facilities and areas for improvement is necessary. Recognizing the need at the federal, state, and local levels will help providers and advocates articulate opportunities for improvement and identify the types of resources required.

Access to Funding. Federal, state, and local governments should identify opportunities to reallocate funds to improve early learning facilities in their respective budgets. These improvements and renovations can create spaces that positively impact children's development.

Technical Assistance and Capacity Building for Early Childhood Providers. Technical assistance and capacity building must be a core component of the funding strategies for early learning facilities. Early learning providers often lack the experience or expertise needed to navigate aspects of facilities improvement such as business, financing, and construction. Similarly, traditional banks and financial entities rarely possess the specialization to effectively serve early learning providers. While Community Development Financial Institutions and other intermediary organizations can provide capacity building for these groups, they do not exist in all communities.

Regulatory, Zoning Ordinance, and Building Code Opportunities and Challenges. A review of challenges created by regulations, laws, and statutes should be

developed to help providers access information on regulatory pitfalls and identify opportunities for overcoming them.

2. Early learning programs are an essential workforce support and an essential component of the workforce system. Investments in early care and learning facilities should be an element of federal, state, and local economic-development strategies.

Early learning programs, especially child care, make it possible for parents to work. The facilities themselves not only influence the quality of a child's experience, but they also directly affect the ability of providers to expand access to care to meet the needs of the evolving workforce.

3. Home-based early learning programs and programs in other settings require infrastructure investments to address facility needs.

Providers in center-based care are not the only ones struggling with how to address the design, construction, acquisition, or renovation of early learning facilities. Family child care providers face numerous challenges to ensure that they offer early learning experiences in a safe and developmentally appropriate physical setting. Local zoning ordinances and regulatory funding structures can create barriers (for example, septic-tank testing, well-water testing, fencing, and related upgrades if needed to comply with regulations) to opening a home-based program. In suburban areas, an increasing number of home ownership associations are banning the operation of licensed home-based child care programs. In order to effectively serve children and families, early learning systems seeking to address facilities needs must include specialized resources for in-home, family-based providers.

4. Early learning facilities—and the policies that support them—should be flexible and adaptable to account for changes in the workplace, caregiving, and other systems that impact children and families.

One-size-fits-all solutions designed to support workers and their children in an industrial economy will not work in the postindustrial economy of the 21st century. While no one can predict the future, policies that are capable of evolving to meet unforeseeable challenges can be created. The most effective way to design for evolution is to embrace variations and diversity.

Multi-Sector Responsibility for Early Learning Facilities

For too long, the physical infrastructure of early learning environments has been neglected. The philanthropic sector, the faith community, the business community, and the federal, state, and local governments each play a distinct role and share responsibility in creating and implementing policies that support early learning facilities. Both the public and private sectors should begin to address the challenges of early learning facilities by targeting specific issues.

FEDERAL ROLE

- Highlight explicit opportunities for investing in early learning facilities, including the acquisition of space, construction, and renovation (for example, Opportunity Zones).
- Include early learning facilities in disaster-relief funding.
- Establish incentives to encourage private-sector financing and investments in early learning facilities.
- Require that funding streams targeted to rural areas address the needs of early learning facilities, particularly for early learning programs in homes and other diverse settings.
- Create and promote the use of an information-sharing resource that describes the infrastructure need, program tools, and financial resources, and make this resource accessible to early learning providers.

STATE ROLE

- Coordinate with existing statewide early learning networks or Children's Cabinets to collect data on facility funding and infrastructure needs.
- Include early learning facilities in the assessment and prioritization of need within respective Quality Rating and Improvement Systems.
- Adopt policies that support public-private partnerships and leverage private-sector investments to help early learning programs develop safe and developmentally appropriate learning environments.

LOCAL ROLE

- Identify child care deserts and include early learning in infrastructure-investment and economic-development agendas.
- Require communities to review local regulatory and zoning ordinances and identify opportunities and obstacles for early learning providers.

- Share data on early learning facility needs and funding to statewide early learning networks or Children's Cabinets.
- Adopt policies that support public-private partnerships and leverage private-sector investments to help early learning programs develop safe and developmentally appropriate learning environments.

PRIVATE/PHILANTHROPIC ROLE

- Include early learning facilities as a component of quality programing in early learning agendas.
- Work with community foundations at the local level to provide resources for needs assessments, to support fundraising efforts for early learning facility improvements, and to leverage endowment, private-sector, or social-impact resources to encourage financing or investments in early learning facilities.
- Highlight existing research and develop a research agenda on early learning facilities best practices—in both center-based and home-based settings—to drive public awareness, public policy, and publicly funded initiatives.
- Support policy development, coordination, and funding of a national needs assessment of early learning facilities.

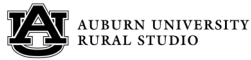


Image source: Children's Workshop in Lincoln, RI. Provided by LISC.

CROSS-CUTTING

- Include early learning in infrastructure-investment and economic-development agendas across all levels of government and within private and philanthropic organizations.
- Include early learning facility quality as a component of program quality in surveys or assessments.
- Fund policy, educational, and public health research that explores the impact of early learning facilities on child outcomes.
- Explore new financing mechanisms for early learning facilities across federal, state, and local governments, such as government bonds.¹⁴

Signatories



Endnotes

- 1 Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation. *National Survey of Early Care and Education 2010–2015*. Available at: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/national-survey-of-early-care-and-education-nsece-2010-2014>.
- 2 Mav Pardee. *Building an Infrastructure for Quality: An Inventory of Early Childhood Education and Out-of-School Time Facilities in Massachusetts*. Children’s Investment Fund. July 2011. Available at: <https://cedac.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CIFBldgInfrastructureReport.pdf>.
- 3 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. “Lead in Drinking Water in Schools and Childcare Facilities.” Drinking Water Requirements for States and Public Water Systems. Available at: <https://www.epa.gov/dwreginfo/lead-drinking-water-schools-and-childcare-facilities>.
- 4 Mav Pardee. *Building an Infrastructure for Quality: An Inventory of Early Childhood Education and Out-of-School Time Facilities in Massachusetts*. Children’s Investment Fund. July 2011. Available at: <https://cedac.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CIFBldgInfrastructureReport.pdf>.
- 5 Audits included both center- and home-based Child Care and Development Fund child care providers. See: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *More Effort Is Needed to Protect the Integrity of the Child Care and Development Fund Block Grant Program*. Office of Inspector General. July 2016. Available at: <https://oig.hhs.gov/oei/reports/oei-03-16-00150.pdf>.
- 6 Mav Pardee. *Building an Infrastructure for Quality: An Inventory of Early Childhood Education and Out-of-School Time Facilities in Massachusetts*. Children’s Investment Fund. July 2011. Available at: <https://cedac.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CIFBldgInfrastructureReport.pdf>.
- 7 Rhode Island Child Care Facilities Fund. *Rhode Island Early Learning Facility Needs Assessment*. Local Initiatives Support Corporation: Rhode Island. July 2014. Available at: <https://riccelff.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/NeedsAssessmentReport.pdf>.
- 8 Rasheed Malik and Katie Hamm. “Mapping America’s Child Care Deserts.” Center for American Progress. August 30, 2017. Available at: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2017/08/30/437988/mapping-americas-child-care-deserts/>.
- 9 In Massachusetts, the Children’s Investment Fund found that an average of \$18,000 per center was required to bring early education and out-of-school facilities up to regulatory standards; \$90,000 per center was required to bring facilities up to professional standards; and \$154,000 per center was required to meet best-practice standards. The inventory only included licensed, non-profit centers. See: Mav Pardee. *Building an Infrastructure for Quality: An Inventory of Early Childhood Education and Out-of-School Time Facilities in Massachusetts*. Children’s Investment Fund. July 2011. Available at: <https://cedac.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CIFBldgInfrastructureReport.pdf>.
- 10 To obtain the estimate, multiply the estimated number of child care centers nationally (110,000) by the amount per center required for renovations.
- 11 Office of Head Start. *Head Start Facilities Report: Fiscal Year 2015*. Administration of Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2015. Available at: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/hs-facilities-report-fy2015.pdf>.
- 12 Tony Proscio, Carl Sussman, and Amy Gillman. *Child Care Facilities: Quality by Design*. Local Initiatives Support Corporation. May 2004. Available at: http://www.lisc.org/media/filer_public/28/68/2868a2eb-5d68-4f45-b442-b8eb4bdfc799/2004_cick_quality_by_design.pdf.
- 13 Carl Sussman and Amy Gillman. *Building Early Childhood Facilities: What States Can Do to Create Supply and Promote Quality*. Preschool Policy Report. National Institute for Early Education Research and Local Initiatives Support Corporation. April 2007. Available at: https://www.pewtrusts.org/~/media/legacy/uploadedfiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/reports/pre-k_education/buildingearlychildhoodfacilitiespdf.pdf.
- 14 For example, over the past 13 years, Minnesota has issued general obligation bonds for early childhood learning facilities, ranging from about \$500 million to \$6 million per issue. Funds are provided as grants that can range between \$200,000 and \$500,000. One limiting factor, however, is that child care facilities must be on public land and the grant process makes funding only practical for schools or large public entities.