



# Child Care is Health Justice

Ensuring Access to High Quality Early Education and Care Is Key to Advancing Health Equity

## SOLVING THE CHILD CARE CRISIS ADVANCES HEALTH EQUITY

While Massachusetts has often led the nation in establishing social programs that serve the public good – such as public K-12 education and affordable health care – it lags far behind when it comes to investing in equitable access to early education and care. Failure to make a public investment in early education and child care is a missed opportunity to optimize health and wellness for both children and adults. Indeed, high-quality early education and care contributes to robust early childhood development; supports the physical and mental well-being of children; and has important spillover effects that promote healthy families, caregivers, and communities.

### **Healthy early childhood development – cognitive, social-emotional, and physical – promotes a child’s capacities to learn and their physical and mental health.**

- High-quality care, in which caregivers are nurturing and responsive and the experience is predictable and structured(1), can provide an environment that supports children’s healthy brain development, which in turn can have lifelong impacts on their health and wellness.

### **High-quality education and care contributes to building resilience in children, which in turn can promote positive health outcomes over the long-term.**

- The supportive relationships characteristically present in high quality early education and care can be a protective buffer against chronic stress and contribute to children’s long-term resilience.(2) Such resilience can help mitigate long-term health effects associated with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and toxic stress, including inflammation, which is a risk factor for type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular and metabolic disorders, and various other diseases.(3)
- Research has shown that teenagers who attended preschool had significantly lower blood pressure and levels of stress at age 15, as compared to peers who had not participated in early learning programs.(4)

### **High quality early education and care has positive impacts on the mental health of caregivers.**

- Strong social connections, including those built through meeting other caregivers enrolled in a shared care setting, promote reduced stress in adults.(5) Those same social connections may also reduce caregiver isolation and have a positive influence on maternal health, including by reducing mortality in pregnancy and childbirth.(6)

**PUBLIC POLICY THAT MAKES HIGH-QUALITY EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS AFFORDABLE FOR ALL FAMILIES, WOULD SERVE AS AN INVESTMENT IN THE LONG-TERM PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS’ CHILDREN, THEIR FAMILIES, AND EARLY EDUCATORS.**

1 Yoshikawa H, Weiland C, Brooks-Gunn J, et al. Investing in our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education Ann Arbor, MI: Society for Research in Child Development; 2013.

2 National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2015). *Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience: Working Paper No. 13*. Retrieved from [www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu).

3 Martin A, Johnson AD, Castle S. Reframing High-Quality Public Preschool as a Vehicle for Narrowing Child Health Disparities Based on Family Income. *Academic Pediatrics*. 2021 Apr;21(3):408-413.

4 Sabol, T. J., & Hoyt, L. T. (2017). The long arm of childhood: Preschool associations with adolescent health. *Developmental Psychology*, 53(4), 752, p. 753.

5 Research illustrated that parents who enrolled their child in a child care center had better outcomes related to material and mental hardship, with the odds of experiencing depression greatly reduced among those who enrolled their children in centers. <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/resource/mario-small-on-how-social-networks-and-social-capital-matter-for-human-services-programs/>

6 Wang, Eileen et al. "Social Determinants of Pregnancy-Related Mortality and Morbidity in the United States: A Systematic Review." *Obstetrics and gynecology* vol. 135,4 (2020): 896-915.

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**High quality early education and care has positive impacts on the mental health of caregivers.** (*cont'd from previous page*)

- The positive impact of early childhood development programs on parents and guardians may also promote positive outcomes in children's health: for example, home visiting programs that teach parenting skills and provide supports to reduce parent stress may in turn reduce future mental health incidence in children.<sup>(7)</sup>
- Early educators who receive the appropriate compensation, health care benefits, and in-service supports may experience improved mental and physical health. In addition, caregiver well-being promotes higher-quality interactions with children in their care.<sup>(8)</sup>

## Solving the Child Care Crisis to Advance Health Equity Requires:

- **Ensuring that all families of all incomes are able to equitably access affordable, high-quality early education for their children.**
  - Families with household incomes below 50 percent of statewide median income (SMI) should be able to access early education and child care options for free; in Massachusetts this would impact families with incomes of less than approximately \$65,500. Above \$65,500, a sliding fee scale could apply and no family should pay more than 7 percent of their household income for care.
- **Supporting early education and care providers' ability to deliver family-centric wraparound services, including health and mental health supports.**
  - Foundational funding should be granted directly to providers, to cover the full range of operational costs associated with high quality early education and care, including provision of wraparound services that promote health and wellbeing. Early education and care programs serving lower-income families and/or children with special needs should be eligible to receive higher levels of public funding.
- **Advancing early educator health and well-being by requiring pay equity and full-scope benefits for educators.**
  - Early educators should be paid commensurate with equivalent teacher positions in the public school system and have access to health, retirement, and paid leave, amongst other benefits.
- **Improving how the Department of Early Education and Care coordinates delivery of wraparound services that promote children's health and well-being, as well as improving coordination between the Department and other government agencies.**

<sup>7</sup> [https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/NIEER-Policy-Update\\_Health\\_2019.pdf](https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/NIEER-Policy-Update_Health_2019.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.childtrends.org/es/blog/the-health-and-well-being-of-early-childhood-educators-a-need-for-compassion-and-commitment>

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