

Child Care and Early Education Solutions for NJ's Working Families



Quality child care and early education for young children is essential to building strong families, strong communities and an economically-healthy state and nation. Child care is more than a family issue. It is an economic issue that affects thousands of working parents, employers and child care workers across the state.

More than 400,000 New Jersey children ages 5 and under live in families where both parents work. New Jersey parents face particular challenges in finding quality early care for their children. The cost of care can take a huge bite out of a family's budget, about 24 percent for an average New Jersey family with two young children.

For a family with one child struggling to survive on poverty-level wages, the cost of care can consume half of their annual salary. That is much higher than the recommended 10 percent of family income. When factoring in New Jersey's high housing costs, even parents earning a decent wage struggle to afford quality care.

New Jersey also faces challenges in regulating and measuring the quality of care children receive in different settings across the state. The state ranks nearly last in the nation for its oversight of child care, according to Child Care Aware of America. It is only now beginning to develop a statewide system to rate and improve child care quality called Grow NJ Kids. This system would provide parents with information about the quality of care a provider offers, while giving child care providers the tools and resources they need to improve quality. A federal grant application is pending that would help fund the first four years of this initiative.

Advocates for Children of New Jersey's *Meeting New Jersey's Child Care Challenge: A Kids Count Special Report*, December 2013 describes New Jersey's child care system, identifies its strengths and challenges and provides data to help policymakers develop informed decisions about how to address these challenges. It is critical for the fiscal health of our families and our state that we develop solutions to ensure all New Jersey children are cared for in

safe, nurturing environments during their critical first years when their brain develops faster than at any time of their life, laying the foundation for lifelong success.

To help New Jersey's working parents afford child care and to improve the quality of care available, New Jersey should take both immediate steps and develop and implement long-term plans.

Immediate Steps:

- One aspect of Grow NJ Kids, the state's plan to improve child care quality, is to create an online "parent portal" where parents could access information about the quality of care a provider offers. The first step toward achieving this goal is to post child care center inspection and violations reports online in a user-friendly format for parents.
- Hire more child care center inspectors to lower the caseload so they have more time to conduct thorough inspections.
- Require fingerprinting and criminal background checks for family child care providers and those living in the home. Legislation is pending that would require this. According to the state Office of Legislative Services, this change would cost \$3.7 million a year — a small price to strengthen child safety.

- Conduct effective, coordinated outreach to eligible families to expand access to child care assistance by following the blueprint in NIEER's 2012 report, *More than Marketing: A New Jersey Study on Outreach to Underserved Populations Ages Birth to Five*. (This step is identified as part of the plan for rolling out Grow NJ Kids).

Long-term goals:

- Ensure adequate funding exists to support the full implementation of Grow NJ Kids. Even if the state receives a federal grant to implement the first phase of this child care rating system, that grant will only provide support for the first four years. The grant application envisions serving 40 percent of at-risk children. A long-term plan needs to be developed and funded to ensure this system is available to all parents and their children throughout the state.
- Explore enacting a state child care tax credit. While a federal credit exists, New Jersey does not provide a credit on state income taxes. This option should be explored, using a cost/benefits analysis and identifying potential sources of funding for such a credit.

For more information, visit www.acnj.org or contact Diane Dellanno at ddellanno@acnj.org.

Right from the Start

This report is part of Advocates for Children of New Jersey's ongoing Right from the Start Campaign, aimed at improving the safety, health and well-being of New Jersey's youngest children. This initiative examines issues and advances change to give children the strongest possible start.

A coordinated early care and education system, starting at birth and continuing into a child's early elementary years, is the foundation to ensure that children are reading on target by 3rd grade. This early literacy is key to long-term school

success. Child care is a critical piece of an effective early learning system, as is high-quality preschool and early intervention programs.

While New Jersey has some aspects of a strong early care and education system in place — quality preschools for some children and growing use of home visitation services — there is still much more to do before we can say that all children are getting off to the right start.

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