

Survey Reveals NJ Business Leaders' Views on Early Childhood Education



By Diane Dellanno

Executive Summary

Quality early childhood education is vital to New Jersey's future economic growth and to maintaining a highly-skilled workforce. Research shows that children who experience high-quality early education have a better chance of arriving at kindergarten with the skills they need for school success.

They are more likely to complete high school and attend college, entering the workforce job ready and well-prepared. As adults, they enjoy higher earnings and better health and incur fewer social costs.

Quality early education, including child care, is also critical for business success. Employers need to attract and retain qualified employees who reliably come to work and are focused on the job. For working parents to be productive employees, they need safe, reliable and affordable child care.

Given the link between high quality early childhood education and a vibrant economy, business leaders are important allies in making the case for early childhood investments. However, in New Jersey, efforts to engage business leaders in advocating for preschool expansion and other early childhood programs, such as child care, have been relatively unsuccessful.

To gain a better understanding of how New Jersey's business community views early childhood education and identify ways to engage them in our advocacy efforts to expand quality preschool and child care, Advocates for Children of New Jersey surveyed about 400 business leaders from across the state, working in medium- and large-sized companies.



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.

Giving Every Child A Chance

Key Findings

The survey revealed some interesting attitudes about early education that can help inform our efforts to engage the business community.

They include:

Early education is important. Survey respondents agreed that early education is important for young children.

Lack of understanding of early childhood education. While they viewed early education as important, survey respondents had different definitions of what this term meant. Some identified it as child care, while others said preschool. It did not appear that survey respondents understood the difference between the two and the more comprehensive nature of early childhood education.

They viewed early childhood education as a parent's responsibility. Although New Jersey publicly funds preschool in communities throughout the state and provides child care subsidies to thousands of parents, business leaders viewed this as a parent's responsibility, presenting a challenge in engaging them in advocating for public dollars to support quality early education.

Retention and absenteeism key concerns. Survey respondents identified employee retention and absenteeism as top concerns that directly affect their ability to conduct business in New Jersey. This presents an opportunity to engage business leaders, especially around child care, with a message highlighting the need for parents to have safe, reliable care so that they can go to work and be productive employees.

Long-term outcomes viewed as less convincing. The survey respondents did not respond as well to messages around the long-term benefits of quality early education, such as building a skilled competitive workforce and reducing remedial and societal costs.

For the advocacy community, the survey shows that there is much more work to do to garner support from the business community for early childhood

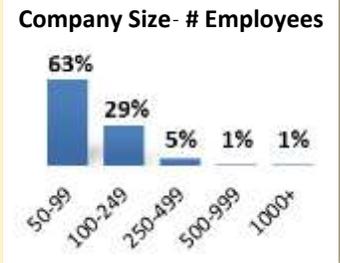
education. It also highlights the need to speak about this issue in terms that resonate with business leaders. This means that we need to alter our definitions of the early childhood system to focus on child care and be clearer in how this directly affects their ability to operate a successful business in New Jersey.

Scope of Survey Participants



The telephone survey, conducted by the Eagleton Institute of Politics, Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers University, included 404 business leaders -- 57 percent male and 43 percent female -- in various leadership positions within the company.

Survey participants were selected from a potential sample size of 9,825 companies and closely reflected the sample size in terms of region, publicly/privately held, franchise status and company size.



For the purpose of the study, educational, governmental and nonprofit entities were excluded. Also, only businesses that were headquartered in New Jersey were asked to participate and those with at least a total of 50 full or part-time employees. Nearly half of the companies surveyed were based in the northern region of the state. Another quarter were from the central part of New Jersey, with the remaining split between the south and shore regions.

Companies with less than 250 employees made up nearly 90 percent of the potential survey sample, with 63 percent of the companies surveyed having less than 100 employees. The majority of companies surveyed (89%) have been in business for more than 10 years, with two-thirds (68%) reporting being in business more than 20 years.

The Survey Results

Survey participants were asked a variety of questions to gauge their understanding of early childhood education concepts, identify issues facing New Jersey employers and employees and assess the level of advocacy business leaders may be willing to offer.

Preschool vs. Child Care

More than one-third of respondents defined early education as preschool that is more often paid for by parents than publicly funded. Another one-third defined it as a combination of preschool and early child care. Child care for children younger than five is what immediately came to mind for 18 percent of those surveyed and was described as care that more often occurs in a center-type setting rather than in a home. Companies with higher numbers of parents with young children were more likely to define early childhood education as child care rather than preschool.

Business Concerns

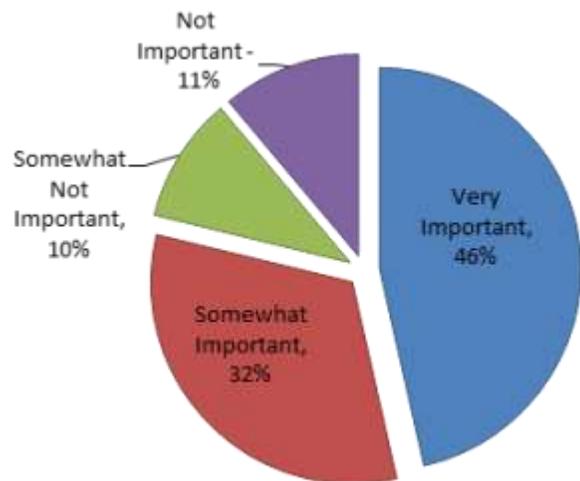
A series of questions were asked concerning the major issues New Jersey businesses face today. Most leaders said they have a somewhat negative view of the current business climate.

More than half of survey participants (53%) said the general business climate in New Jersey was fair and nearly one-third (31%) described it as good. Less than 2 percent felt the business climate was excellent.

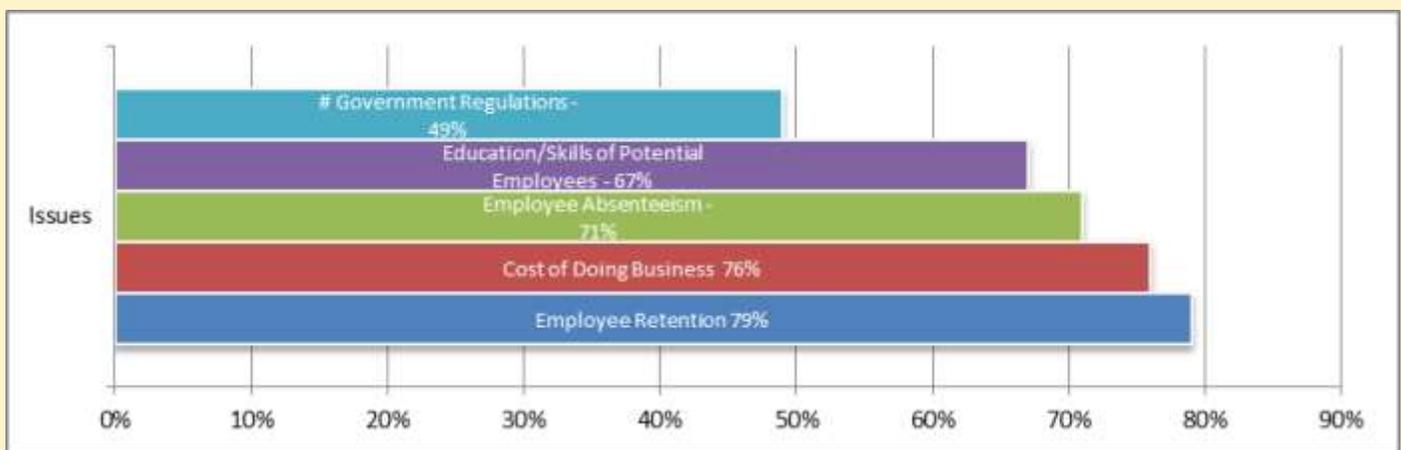
Participants were read a list of issues and asked to rate each as to how important they were to the success of their business. At least seven out of 10 executives cited workforce retention and employee absenteeism among their greatest concerns.

When asked specifically about the importance of early childhood education for their business, nearly half agreed that it was very important, while one-third rated it as somewhat important.

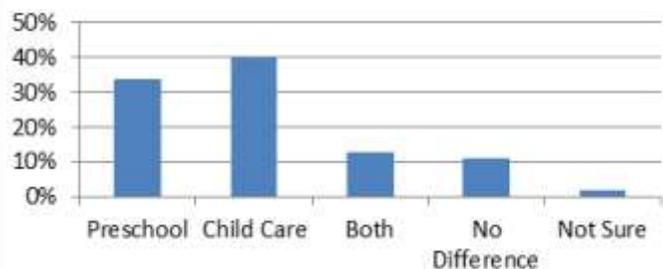
How Important is Early Childhood Education to Your Business?



Issues of Concern for the New Jersey Business Community



Type of Early Education More Important To Their Business



Assistance paying for child care was more likely identified as important when talking to female leaders and franchisees.

Not surprisingly, companies with more parents with young children also said this issue was important to their employees. Fewer agreed that on-site child care was important to their employees and only 18 percent of companies surveyed provided this benefit.

Messaging

Another goal of the survey was to identify messages that may motivate business leaders to make early childhood education more of a priority for their business. Participants were read several messages frequently used to demonstrate the impact of high-quality early childhood education and asked to comment on the extent they felt the message was convincing.

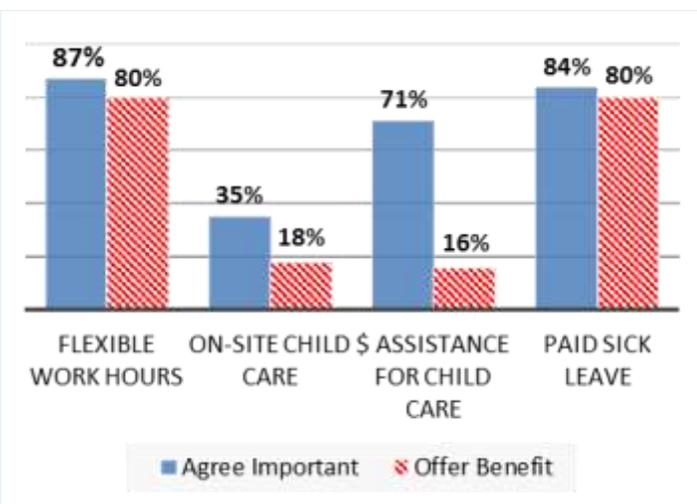
The messages included:

- *Research shows that during a child's first five years, the brain grows faster than at any other time and that quality child care and preschool support that growth, giving young children the foundation they need to succeed in school and become productive members of the workforce.*
- *Children who attend high-quality preschool are more likely to read at grade level by 3rd grade, which increases the likelihood of graduating high school, attending college and being equipped for the workforce.*
- *Businesses benefit when parents can find and afford reliable child care because it allows parents to go to work, reducing absenteeism and improving overall job performance.*
- *Early childhood education helps reduce taxpayer expenses for remedial costs caused by crime and other societal problems and this strengthens the overall economy.*
- *Quality preschool helps New Jersey build a skilled, competitive workforce for the future.*

In regards to which was more important to their business, preschool or child care, slightly more respondents (40%) said that child care was more important than preschool (34%).

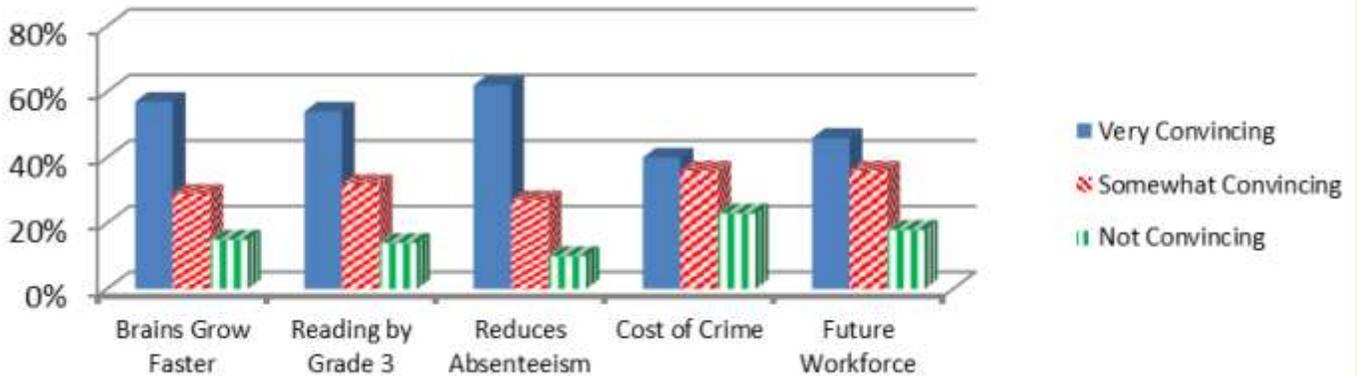
Male business leaders and employees of businesses where fewer parents work cited preschool as more important than child care. Women executives and those working at companies and locations with more parents of young children making up the workforce viewed child care as more important than preschool.

Regarding issues that are important to employees of their companies, the majority agreed or strongly agreed that flexible work hours and paid sick leave were important.



These issues were also more frequently reported as being provided as a benefit. While nearly three quarters agreed that financial assistance to help pay for child care was important, only 16 percent of the companies provided this as a benefit.

How Convincing are Early Childhood Messages?



Findings were consistent with responses to other survey questions that asked about business concerns, with 62 percent of the survey participants identifying reducing employee absenteeism and increasing job performance as very convincing reasons for them to support child care. More than half of the respondents (57%) said the message regarding a child's brain development was also very convincing.

Less convincing were the messages that referred to the long-term benefits of early childhood education, such as building a skilled competitive workforce and reducing remedial and societal costs. Business leaders appear to be more convinced by messaging linking early childhood education directly to more immediate business benefits.

Support for Early Education

Lastly, the survey sought to identify ways, if any, business leaders would lend support to improving early childhood education in New Jersey. Participants were read several activities that business leaders in other states frequently participate in to help support early childhood including,

- Join a statewide coalition of business leaders.
- Speak publicly in the press or social media about the importance of early childhood education.

- Talk to an elected official to support public investments in early childhood education.
- Provide small grants to local child care centers to improve the quality of child care for children.

While results indicated that business leaders would be more likely to join a coalition or speak with an elected official, only slightly more than half expressed an interest in doing so. Fewer executives were willing to provide small grants or speak publicly about the benefits of early childhood education.

Companies more likely to support efforts to increase early childhood investments include those that have:

- A higher percentage of employees with young children,
- Females in senior leadership positions,
- High concentrations of employees who work on-site, and
- Smaller and franchise-owned companies.



Conclusion

From preparing young children for school and career success to supporting parent participation in the labor force, the benefits of a strong system of early childhood education have been well documented.

Due to the wealth of evidence that demonstrates investments in early childhood have a strong economic return, business leaders in other states have become important allies in advocacy efforts to improve early childhood education. When compared to other states, New Jersey has been much less successful in engaging business leaders to promote investments in early childhood education.

While the survey revealed some promising results, such as a large number of executives surveyed acknowledging the importance of early childhood education for their business and demonstrating an understanding of the role of child care plays in supporting their employees, when asked if they would act to improve early childhood education, fewer indicated that they would actively lend support to this issue.

To more effectively engage business leaders, survey results suggest messaging should be linked to those issues perceived of high importance to businesses, which include workforce retention and employee absenteeism. Including these concepts as part of the messaging could help to convince executives that early childhood should be more of a priority for their businesses. In addition, business leaders also appeared more convinced by those claims and messaging linking early childhood education directly to more immediate business benefits.

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