

Early Childhood Education: The Smart Investment for New Jersey's Future

By Arturo Brito and Curtland E. Fields

When Democrats and Republicans agree on little else, it is encouraging to see Trenton's growing bipartisan commitment to early childhood. As philanthropies with deep roots in New Jersey, we recognize this is a unique opportunity for progress in giving our youngest and most vulnerable the chance they deserve, at the same time healing our communities, and growing our economy.

[The Turrell Fund](#) and [The Nicholson Foundation](#) prioritize the care and education of young children for two reasons: the first few years lay the foundation for the rest of a child's life; and there are no do-overs in childhood. Research shows that early experiences signaling to a child that he or she is safe at home, supported in exploring the world, and surrounded by a caring community build neural connections that contribute to healthy behaviors in areas ranging from eating habits to perseverance, and interpersonal relationships. Early experiences that signal danger, deprivation, and isolation contribute to equally expansive unhealthy behaviors.

Those early experiences affect everything from classroom performance to health and lifelong earnings. By shaping their formative years, our economic and policy choices almost literally wire some New Jersey children to learn and thrive and others to struggle and fail.

Those weighty consequences make the leadership shown by former Governor Chris Christie and newly inaugurated Governor Phil Murphy welcome indicators of opportunity. Christie committed \$25 million to pre-K in this year's budget, increased the child care subsidy rate for the first time in more than 10 years, and began linking reimbursement rates with care quality. Murphy ran in part on commitments to pre-K and K-12, and both his appointments to the transition team and key cabinet positions signal the Administration's priority on children's issues.

But early childhood policy isn't a menu with lots of options to choose from. It's like a building, with each developmental stage defined by the strength or weakness of the one below.

Lasting change with statewide impact requires a comprehensive approach, supporting young children at every stage of their development. Prenatal care improves the odds of a healthy birth. Family leave promotes parental bonding and physical health for the first few weeks of a baby's life. Quality child care cultivates critical traits and social skills. And quality pre-K introduces academic concepts and prepares kids for the goal-setting and structure of K-12 education. Getting education right from the start means affordable, quality opportunities at every developmental stage.

As they deepen their investment in pre-K, our leaders should pair it with smart strategies to strengthen child care. Why start with child care? Because that's where New Jersey's early childhood structure is cracking.

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Two 2017 reports by [Advocates for Children of New Jersey](#) (ACNJ) highlight some of the challenges. Fewer than half of licensed child care centers are licensed to care for infants and toddlers. As a result, nearly three-quarters of the more than 207,000 babies and toddlers with working parents cannot get licensed care. In large part, that's because the state's infant subsidy rate was an alarming 40 percent below national standards for quality care. While the recent infant care subsidy increase is a welcome down payment, real progress requires a sustained investment.

Governor Murphy has demonstrated his commitment to lead on this important issue. But he cannot do it alone, and building meaningful change requires the active engagement of concerned New Jerseyans. That's why we launched a new initiative called [Right from the Start NJ](#). Our vision is simple: By 2022, every baby born in New Jersey will have access to safe, high-quality care and education. At the center of the initiative is a public awareness campaign aimed at educating parents, professionals, and policymakers about what they can do to improve the health and well-being of children, right from the start.

Beyond learning about the issues, we encourage concerned citizens to get involved. Tell your representatives in Trenton that you want every New Jersey child to reach his or her potential. And ask them to share their priorities for a policy agenda that supports young children at every developmental stage.

Our state's future is at stake, and there are no do-overs. This is an opportunity we cannot afford to waste.

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