

## Investing in High Quality Pre-K Programs

In 2008 when the Council of the District of Columbia passed its landmark legislation, the Pre-K Enhancement and Expansion Act, DC led the nation in guaranteeing that all 3- and 4-year-olds would have access to a high-quality early care and education program. This was a critically important investment in our young children, but it was not sufficient to ensure that all our children, especially those most at risk, are prepared to succeed in school and in life. Only high-quality programs produce positive outcomes, and we have not yet achieved that goal.

### Why Quality in the Early Years Matters

The first five years of a child's life are more formative than at any other stage, creating either a sturdy or a fragile foundation. Seventy-five percent of brain growth and 85% of intellectual, personality, and social skills develop before age 5. To make the most of these early years, children need consistent and nurturing care, safe and stimulating environments, nutritious food and attention to their physical needs, and opportunities to engage in positive interactions with adults and other children.

Study after study shows that children who attend high-quality early learning programs demonstrate higher levels of school achievement and better social and emotional skills. They are less likely to repeat a grade or require special education services and more likely to graduate from high school. These are the outcomes we can

expect if we ensure that every program serving young children is a high-quality program.

### What Quality Looks Like

#### ***Highly Qualified/Highly Compensated Teachers:***

The first building block toward high-quality programs is ensuring that lead teachers hold a BA degree in early childhood education, or a related field, with formalized training in child development and proven strategies for effective teaching and learning of young children. Teachers must also receive comparable compensation regardless of their work setting.

#### ***Positive Teacher-Child Interactions:***

The second most important factor in program quality is teacher/child interactions. Teachers who make a significant difference in children's lives are caring individuals who are genuine in their interactions with children, and intentional about planning and executing rich and meaningful experiences that promote children's social-emotional and intellectual development.

#### ***A Robust and Engaging Curriculum:***

The third most important factor in program quality is what is taught and how it is taught. Children benefit greatly from a hands-on, comprehensive curriculum that is standards-based, play-based, assessment-based, and incorporates all of the domains of learning. A curriculum should take into consideration age-appropriate, individually-appropriate, and culturally-appropriate learning. It should

challenge children to think critically, creatively and continuously about how the world around them works, and who they are in relationship to that world.

#### ***A Child-Centered Classroom Environment:***

The fourth most important factor in program quality is the physical space. Environments for young children should be safe, well-organized, visually stimulating and designed to increase children's knowledge and skills through investigation, exploration and experimentation. A space designed to meet children's developmental needs and abilities has a wide variety of open-ended materials that are attractively displayed, rotated regularly, and within children's reach.

#### ***Adult/Child Ratios:***

The fifth most important factor in program quality is ensuring the safety, health and overall well-being of young children by having the appropriate number of adults supervising the appropriate number of children, in small groups, based on the children's ages. For children ages 3 and 4 there should be two teachers and a class size of 15-18.

#### ***Partnerships with Families:***

The sixth most important factor in program quality is partnerships with families. Children benefit from partnerships that value, honor and celebrate the cultural, linguistic and structural diversity of their families and that promote an open-door welcoming program ethos. Regardless of socio-economic background, children are successful in school when parents are interested and engaged in their learning at school and at home.

## **A Call to Action**

The potential of early childhood programs to make a positive difference in the lives of young children and their families is too important to leave to chance. We must be willing to invest the resources to help programs achieve the level of quality that will provide every child with a strong foundation to be ready for school, ultimately to

lead fulfilling and happy lives, and to contribute to their community.

#### ***Invest in the Workforce:***

Every teacher should have the competencies to build positive relationships with children, and provide instructional support that promotes language development, concept development, and higher order thinking skills. We must ensure that a college degree is accessible and affordable for all pre-k teachers. Programs should provide the ongoing coaching and support many teachers need to ensure meaningful and intentional learning is taking place in every classroom. Teachers in community-based early childhood programs should be compensated at a level comparable to teachers in public school settings.

#### ***Invest in Facilities:***

Too many programs are in buildings not designed for young children. DC has not provided funds to upgrade facilities since 2013. We must invest in upgrading and building facilities designed to meet the developmental and safety needs of young children.

#### ***Develop Partnerships:***

Community-based early childhood programs and elementary schools must develop strong partnerships so principals and teachers:

- Appreciate the value of high-quality early learning experiences.
- Are able to continue a focus on all aspects of children's development and learning.
- Use developmentally appropriate practices in all grades.

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