

Re-framing Early Childhood Education and Care: Strategies for Economic Development in Southeastern Michigan

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"We aren't doing the job if a child leaves a child care center and enters school not ready to learn." **Carole Quarterman, Detroit 4 C's**

The April 2005 Family Impact Seminar addressed the issue of early childhood education as a sound economic investment strategy for Michigan. In conjunction with the seminar presented in Lansing, a forum was convened in Detroit to focus on the strengths and barriers faced by parents living in this large urban metropolitan area. Larry Schweinhart of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation presented his findings from the forty-year study of children who attended the Perry Preschool. Three local experts were assembled to speak to an audience of local government representatives, social service providers and educators. The panel included Carole Quarterman, Director of Wayne County/Detroit Child Care Coordinating Council (4 C's); Jan Windemuth, Adjunct Faculty, College of Education, Wayne State University and Michele Thomas, Director of Bright Horizons Family Solutions (Henry Ford Kids Child Care Center).

Introduction

Women transitioning from welfare to work are particularly vulnerable because their incomes tend to be low, they work shift work or multiple jobs that require child care beyond the normal workday, and many lack access to transportation.

Today, women of all incomes with children of all ages are working outside the home. As a result, they have placed their children in the care of others. The conflict is readily apparent – how will women be able to focus on providing an income for their family through work while still providing the nurturing environment necessary for their children to grow into successful adults? These concerns are paramount for single mothers who are more likely to have fewer resources available for their families, including money to pay for high-quality, high-cost child care. Women transitioning from welfare to work are particularly vulnerable because their incomes tend to be low, they work shift work or multiple jobs that require child care beyond the normal workday, and many lack access to transportation.

Research shows that investment in child care and early childhood development programs also benefit taxpayers in the long term through reduced need for welfare assistance, increased income from tax revenue, less burden on the criminal justice system and fewer children needing remedial education services. In addition, the child care industry generates a significant number of dollars, helps create and support jobs, is vital to supporting parental employment, and helps support families transitioning from welfare to employment.

Panel Discussion

The presenters were given three questions prior to the event and asked to prepare remarks in response. What follows are those questions and the presenters' input. The intent was to gain a better understanding of the structural problems underlying child care as well as discuss viable policy options.

Question 1: Labor costs constitute a large percentage of expenses for a child care agency. To reduce costs, these businesses pay low wages, resulting in a lower skilled workforce and high staff turnover. At the same time, many parents find child care costing as much as 50 percent or more of their earnings. What solution(s) would you propose?

- **Government has a role to play in financing child care.** This goes beyond providing subsidized child care slots and should include base line and consistent funding for service providers.
- **More research needs to be conducted about child care subsidy programs** to gain a better understanding of the role these play in how parents access child care.
- **Child care workers need to be better trained and certified.** Training does not have to be at the college level but more at the vocational technology level. Professional development and recognition of their expertise may attract more individuals to enter this field and to see it as a profession. The issue is not the cost of labor, but the qualifications of staff.
- **It is important to focus on the quality of services provided and to compensate accordingly.** We need to recognize that labor costs are going to continue to constitute a large portion of child care costs (estimated currently at 80 percent).

Questions 2: What do you think should be the components of a “healthy infrastructure for child care”?

- **A national set of criteria and standards for child care and early childhood development** that everyone supports and “buys” into.
- **A system of child care and development for birth to 5 years,** not just to 3 years.
- **Accurate information for parents about the child care market** to help them better choose a child care arrangement. Parents often select what they think is quality care only to discover later that it is not.
- **A cohesive system including all of the various components of care once policy makers understand how parents choose care (and the constraints they face beyond cost).** Currently there is too much fragmentation in the child care market as evidenced by the various types of formal and informal care and varying requirements for children of different ages.
- **More information about how parents make decisions about where to place their children.** We have little understanding of their preferences for child care—we know parents want high quality care for their children, but the care they currently use may not be what they want.
- **The “professionalism” of child care providers must be enhanced through trainings and credentialing.** Workforce development might include support such as scholarships to child care workers who want to enroll in child development classes.

Question 3: We've been talking about child care within an economic framework. What should be the message for the people at the state level who have the power to act for change?

- **Assure access to quality child care for all families.** Child care should be a program that is accessible to all families, not one that targets low-income families through child care subsidies while ignoring the fundamental issues all parents face regarding accessing quality child care.
- **Assist families who cannot afford the full burden of quality child care.** If we agree that ALL children are entitled to early childhood development services, then government must be prepared to partner with families who cannot bear the full burden of increasing the quality of child care.
- **Promote economic development efforts by providing a child care tax credit for employers who subsidize or offer child care on site.** Consider a low-interest revolving loan fund for child care facilities.
- **Understand that benefits accrue over the long term.** Recognize that child care has immediate returns in enabling parents to work but that the greatest payoff from high quality early childhood education and care comes in the long run. (See comments by Schweinhart and Mitchell found in this report.)
- **Market "brain development" as "economic development."** We need to move away from the concept that child care only falls under social work and human services.
- **Recognize that although the child care issue can be framed from an economic development standpoint,** there are other systems' issues that impact child development (e.g., poverty including low wages for parents, poor housing, and access to health care).

Quality child care and early childhood education is critical to family well-being, especially in an urban area where many at-risk families reside.

Policies directed to child care issues must assist parents meeting their familial responsibilities. In this way, parents become empowered and learn strategies to become better parents.

Policy makers must recognize and support family diversity.

Summary

The panel emphasized that quality child care and early childhood education is critical to family well-being, especially in an urban area where many at-risk families reside. Policies directed to child care issues must provide support to assist parents meeting their familial responsibilities. In this way, parents become empowered and learn strategies to become better parents.

Policy makers must recognize and support family diversity. In doing, so, all families will be supported, not only those considered vulnerable. In fact, a cohesive and well-supported system of child care and early childhood services would greatly support families' economic support and caregiving.