


Improving Infant and Toddler Education and Care in New Mexico

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

New Mexico must invest significantly in infant and toddler care and education. Research supports early childhood education, and economic reality necessitates it.

New Mexico's children face many challenges, including poverty and low academic achievement. A safe, stimulating, nurturing environment that incorporates developmentally appropriate learning in the first three years of life can dramatically improve the chances of success later in life.

The research is clear: there are enormous benefits to providing high quality ECE. Children enrolled in such programs have higher scores on math and reading achievement tests, greater language abilities, and higher levels of schooling attainment. These children are less likely to become teenage parents and more likely to have higher earnings as adults and lower incarceration rates. As a result, not only are social savings achieved, but the economy is bolstered by an educated, higher-earning workforce.

Investment in early childhood education (ECE) is a wise choice. Failure to do so robs our children of the best opportunity to become productive citizens and limits the state's capacity to create an economy based on high-wage jobs dependant upon an educated workforce.

While other countries, particularly in Europe, have a long tradition of high-quality, universally available ECE, some states, such as Massachusetts, have made ECE funding a priority. New Mexico has not fully embraced the economic imperative of a state-supported system. While not inexpensive, such an investment would generate long-term, multi-generational gains.

States with high reading and math proficiency scores also have made significant investments in ECE. This suggests that New Mexico has the opportunity—through public investment in quality ECE—to not only help its youngest citizens achieve success, but also reap long-term economic benefits from an educated, productive citizenry.

At present, funding for child care relies largely on federal government monies, although state investment is crucial to fill in the growing gaps. New Mexico's Children, Youth and Families Department (CYFD) provides child care subsidies to eligible families under 150 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), offsetting the cost of child care in registered or licensed homes or centers. However, many more children receive care without a subsidy or from non-registered centers or family members. This situation impacts both quality and the demand for services. More than half of low-income families have a potential need for full-time child care, though many rely on relative care where quality is not monitored. Despite federal government funding and state contributions, ECE in New Mexico remains grossly under-funded, and in 2005, CYFD needed a supplemental appropriation to offset budget shortfalls.

Providing high quality early care and education programs accessible to all families requires not only public investment, but also qualified teachers and staff. However, the salaries for these employees equate them with babysitters instead of skilled workers who can provide quality early child care and education. Due to extraordinarily low wages in this field, teachers with a degree in early childhood education are leaving child care centers for positions in primary and secondary education. While CYFD has instituted a financial incentive program for providers to improve quality, low wages remain a challenge for those seeking to provide quality programs.

Establishing quality ECE programs also requires standards for group size, staff-to-child ratios, and teacher training and qualifications.

There are many reasons to believe that this kind of change can be achieved. Both the public and educators increasingly understand the value of ECE, and many policymakers and government leaders are strong advocates for significant increases in state investments.

The best course of action would be for New Mexico to establish affordable, high-quality early care and education that is accessible to all. The state could bring adult-to-child ratios and group size up to current research standards, improve training, and pay teachers salaries that reflect the importance of quality ECE. The productivity of working parents would increase, thereby boosting New Mexico's economy. In time, children would be better educated, and thereby better able to earn more.

Profound change requires continuing education of the public about the need for quality, state-financed ECE, and studying the costs of implementing such a program in New Mexico.

In the meantime, there are a number of specific steps available to repair the current system. They include:

- raising the eligibility level for child care assistance to at least 250 percent of the Federal Poverty Level;
- transitioning families out of child care assistance over a period of time after their incomes rise beyond the eligibility level;
- increasing funding for quality initiatives, such as the Aim High program, T.E.A.C.H. and WAGE$;
- amending the state's child care licensing regulations to meet national standards for staff-to-child ratios and group size;
- increasing child care subsidy rates; and
- creating a more constructive regulatory process to support relative care through increased reimbursement, training and home visits.

INTRODUCTION

This study reviews the status of early care and education (ECE) programs in New Mexico for children from birth to age three. It reviews the latest research, identifies some best practices, and provides recommendations based on an assessment of the political and economic landscape in New Mexico.

New Mexico's children face many significant challenges. The state has high rates of poverty, single-parent households, high school dropouts, and teen pregnancy. It also has many of the lowest public school test scores in the nation. Any serious attempt to improve the well-being of children must begin at birth and focus significant public investment on improving the quality of life for those in their earliest years. Providing a safe, stimulating, nurturing environment that incorporates accessible, developmentally appropriate learning in the first three years of life can have a dramatic impact on improving the chances of success later in life. Not only would individual children have better outcomes, but the state as a whole would gain a better educated and more productive citizenry, resulting in a positive economic impact.

Early care and education is a wise investment, both for the short and long term. It benefits our youngest citizens socially, emotionally and cognitively, by starting them on the right path and providing the basic tools for success. The current challenge is to develop a high quality ECE system fulfilling the needs and hopes of our families and communities. Failure to do so deprives our children of the best opportunity to become successful and productive citizens and limits the state's capacity to create a high-wage economy dependent upon an educated workforce.

Except from *Early Childdhood Investment Yields Big Payoff*

by Robert G. Lynch

The research is clear: there are enormous benefits to providing high-quality ECE programs. Some of the most notable studies of the benefits associated with investing in early childhood development are the Perry Preschool Project (Ypsilanti, Michigan), the Prenatal/Early Infancy Project (Elmira, New York), the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention (North Carolina), and the Chicago Child-Parent Center Program (Chicago, Illinois). Each of these programs compared children participating in the program with nonparticipating peers and controlled for socioeconomic status.[1]

The findings of these programs[2] demonstrate that children enrolled in high-quality ECE programs have:

- higher scores on math and reading achievement tests;
- greater language abilities;
- less grade retention;
- less need for special education and other remedial work;
- lower dropout rates;
- higher high school graduation rates;
- higher levels of schooling attainment;
- improved nutrition and health; and
- experienced less child abuse and neglect.[3]

These children also are less likely to be teenage parents and more likely to:

- have higher employment and earnings as adults;
- pay more taxes;
- depend less on welfare;
- experience lower rates of alcohol and other drug use;
- engage in fewer criminal acts both as juveniles and as adults; and
- have lower incarceration rates.[4]

Children are not the only ones who benefit from high-quality ECE programs. For example, in one or more studies, mothers of participants:

- have fewer additional births;
- have better nutrition and smoke less during pregnancy;
- are less likely to abuse or neglect their children;
- complete more years of schooling;
- have higher high school graduation rates;
- are more likely to be employed;
- have higher earnings;
- engage in fewer criminal acts;
- have lower rates of alcohol and other drug abuse; and
- are less likely to use welfare.[5]

Source: Robert G. Lynch, "Early Childhood Investment Yields Big Payoff," (San Francisco: WestEd, 2005), p.2-3.

THE CURRENT EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION SYSTEM IN NEW MEXICO

Numbers of Children in Early Care and Education

New Mexico's Children, Youth and Families Department (CYFD) provides a sliding-scale child care subsidy to eligible families under 150 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). According to the estimates of the state demographer, there were approximately 320,000 children under the age of 12, and 133,366 children under the age of five in July 2004.[6] As of October 2005, CYFD reported that, on average, 24,857 children between the ages of zero and 12 are served each month. Of those, 13,575 children are in licensed homes and centers and the other 11,282 children are enrolled in non-licensed, registered homes and centers. There is no record of the number of children who receive child care without a subsidy or those who receive care in non-registered homes. Clearly, a significant number of children receive informal care, often by relatives in private homes.[7] According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, 52 percent of low-income families have a potential need for full-time child care and another 28 percent have a potential need for part-time child care.[8]

TABLE 1
New Mexico Children under Age 5 by Federal Poverty Level, 1999[9]

Federal Poverty Level	Percent of Children in Poverty Category	Number of Children in Poverty Category
<50%	12%	15,449
50-74%	7%	9,302
75-99%	8%	10,444
100-124%	9%	11,139
125-149%	8%	10,808
150-174%	7%	8,579
175-199%	7%	8,536
>200%	42%	53,171
	TOTAL CHILDREN	127,428

TABLE 2
Eligibility for Entitlement Programs by Federal Poverty Level

Federal Poverty Level	Entitlement Program
<130% FPL	Food Stamps
<150% FPL	Child Care Subsidies
<185% FPL	Children's Medicaid
185-235% FPL	State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP)

Current Public Investment in ECE

Eighty-five percent of federal funding for child care comes from several sources, including the Child Development Block Grant funds, and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) funds. The remaining 15 percent of the public investment in child care in New Mexico comes from state general fund monies. While there appears to be strong support within Congress to increase federal funding, legislation has stalled in recent years. The rising federal deficit could reduce federal child care funding. For the past few years, legislation to increase state funding for child care has been introduced with moderate success. Unfortunately, even with modest state funding gains, ECE remains grossly under-funded in New Mexico.

TABLE 3
Program Funding for ECE in FY 2006[10]

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Source of Funds	Amount	Percent
State General Fund	$10,848,100	State 15.6%
Other State Funds	$90,000	
Federal ECE Funds	$31,320,000	Federal 84.4%
Federal Funds Transferred from the N.M. Human Services Department (TANF)	$32,242,300	
Total ECE Budget	**$75,310,400**	**100%**

Most basic brain development occurs in the first three years of life. However, as Graph 1 shows, public investment does not truly begin until a child is six years of age. Graph 1 shows this inverse relationship between the investment of public funds and children's brain development. Despite some recognition of the critical importance of the early years in the development of children's social, emotional, and cognitive skills, new funding for FY 2007 was woefully inadequate, and was especially disappointing given that it was proclaimed the Year of the Child.

GRAPH 1

Brain Development and Investment of Public Dollars for Education[11]

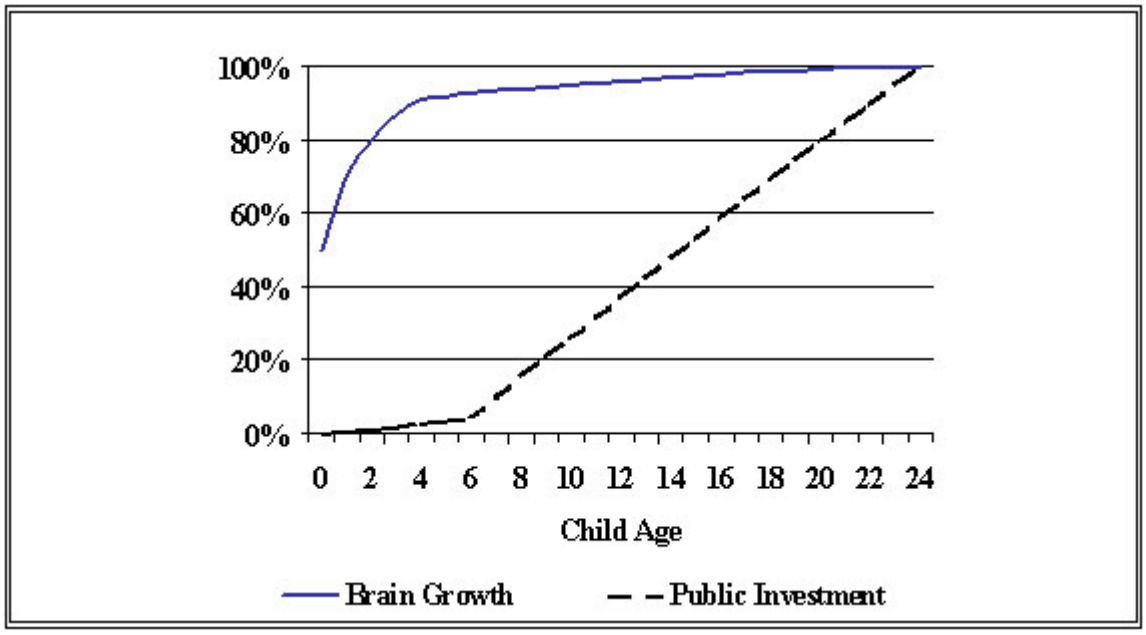


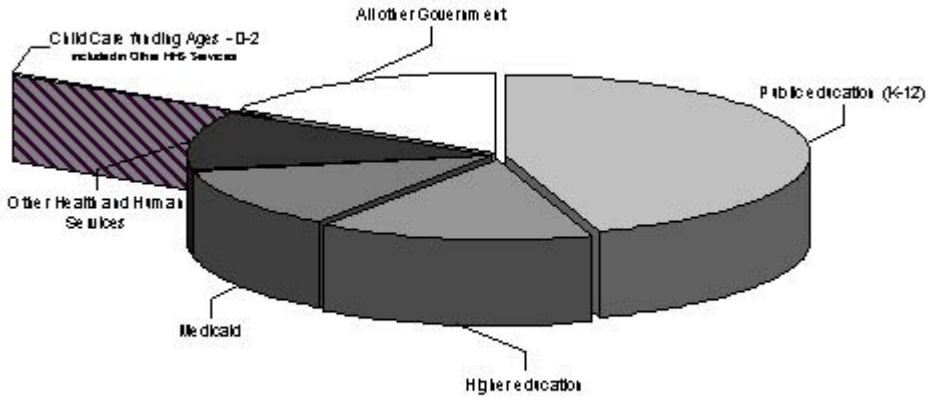
TABLE 4

FY 2006 Recurring State General Fund Appropriations[12]

Program Area	State General Fund Amount	Percent of State General Fund
Public education (K-12)	$2.132 Billion	45.00%
Higher education	$714 Million	15.00%
Medicaid	$559 Million	12.00%
Other Health and Human Services	$560 Million	12.00%
HHS Services includes child care funding (Ages 0-12)	$11.748 Million	0.25%
All other Government	$743 Million	16.00%
Total State General Fund Appropriations	$4.708 Billion	100.00%

In comparison to other funding levels, Table 4 shows just how little investment early care and education receives in New Mexico.

GRAPH 2
FY 2006 Recurring State General Fund Appropriations



In the January 2005 legislative session, early care and education received only 0.5 percent of the total amount of state dollars appropriated for public schools, and only 1.6 percent of the amount budgeted for higher education. Funding for ECE was cut by more than $2.3 million from the previous year. In fiscal year 2006 (encompassing July 1, 2005 to June 30, 2006), CYFD expected to be about $5 million short of what was necessary to ensure that all enrolled families earning up to 150 percent FPL received assistance.[13]

The loss of $2.3 million in ECE state funding in the current budget year caused reductions in both child care assistance and Training and Technical Assistance Programs (TTAPs), including a CYFD-required introductory training course for staff of licensed providers. The child care subsidy budget was reduced by $2,145,825, while the TTAPs were reduced by $189,975 (from $3,357,200 to $3,167,225). According to CYFD, there is a waiting list of providers who want to take the training course, which had been offered without cost. Reduced funds for underwriting the training has meant that CYFD is allowing other qualified instructors to teach the course and charge a fee.

In addition to these funding reductions, another $1.5 million was redirected to increase child care provider rates in rural areas—a necessary and welcome increase for these providers, but also a further drain on the CYFD budget.

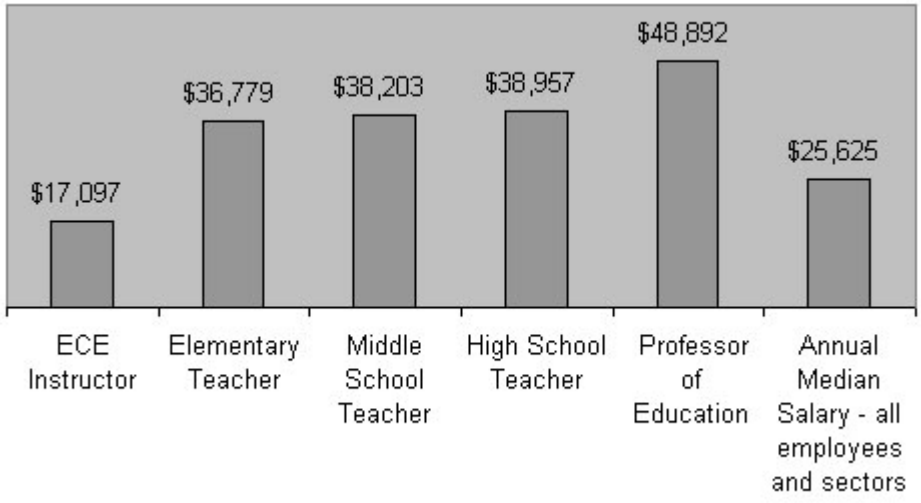
In the January 2006 legislative session, at the onset of the Year of the Child, only slight progress was achieved. Increases in funding totaled only $2.7 million: $1.3 million in additional child care assistance funding, and $1.4 million for provider rate increases. This was very disappointing to the child care community, as it requested $18.1 million to raise child care assistance eligibility from 150 percent to 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, and to implement initiatives to improve quality.

Wages in the ECE Employment Sector

While research clearly demonstrates that the first few years of life are the most critical for learning, the state's public investment policy does not follow suit. As evidenced, the state puts most resources into K-12 and post-secondary education. The lag between public policy and research reflects an older social structure, when most child care took place in the family environment. Changes in work patterns, with more women in the workforce, and in federal welfare policies, which require women receiving public assistance to work, have dramatically altered where our children's earliest learning experiences occur.

If public policy is a reflection of public opinion, then, clearly, the public has been inadequately educated about the importance of quality ECE. This deficit is partially reflected in salaries paid to ECE workers. At least one study has shown that for infant care, higher wages translate to improved quality of care.[14] Child care workers in New Mexico make considerably less than the average wage of all New Mexico workers, and only a fraction of the salary of public school and higher education teachers (*see* graph 3). In effect, the salaries for ECE workers equate them with babysitters rather than skilled workers providing a valuable and developmentally appropriate education.

GRAPH 3
Median Salaries in New Mexico, 2004[15]



A recent study by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) shows that New Mexico had the fourth lowest hourly education wages, with a median hourly rate of $7.48 for ECE teachers and administrators. Across the nation, hourly wages for center-based teachers and administrators ranged from $7.08 to $12.40.

According to the study, New Mexico had the highest percentage of ECE teachers and administrators (44 percent) living below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level.[16]

Other states ranged between 17 and 41 percent. When all center-based ECE staff are included, New Mexico wages ranked third lowest at $7.08, while the highest percentage of center-based ECE staff (49 percent) lived below 200 percent FPL. Those working in home-based child care settings also fall at the bottom of wages nationally, with 60 percent of New Mexico's home-based early care educators living below 200 percent FPL.[17]

This study also uses census data to show how many ECE teachers are leaving child care centers for better paying K-12 teacher positions after earning a bachelor's degree in early childhood education. Ironically, the flight of well-educated teachers causes early childhood education to lose ground at the very time when the research is highlighting its critical importance in later social and academic performance.[18]

One of the most obvious challenges in hiring and retaining quality teachers is combating a low pay scale. Research shows that the most effective preschool instructors have a bachelor's degree, with specialized training in early childhood education or child development. Individuals who have earned a bachelor's degree and teach in classrooms play more creatively and imaginatively.[19] ECE teachers are among the lowest paid professionals. In New Mexico, they make less than $20,000 annually, and work year round. The same degreed individual can teach kindergarten or early elementary school and earn at least $30,000 with benefits and an extended summer vacation. This highlights the challenge of retaining a professional staff.

Turnover is a chronic problem amongst a low-paid workforce. This is particularly detrimental to young children's development, as learning best takes place in the context of a nurturing relationship. Bonding is another crucial aspect of growth for young children, and cannot take place with adults if their presence is inconsistent. This is particularly crucial for at-risk infants and toddlers. If they receive child care of such poor quality it may actually diminish inborn potential and lead to poorer cognitive, social and emotional developmental outcomes.[20]

In fact, a survey of more than 1,000 child care workers conducted by the New Mexico Early Childhood Workforce Study revealed an approximate turnover rate of 22 to 25 percent for full-time child care professionals and 44 percent for part-time staff.[21]

"Child care is the necessary vehicle charged with caring for our youngest children, including our poorest children, for which the state subsidizes. Surely New Mexico can do better than to pay so low that the providers can only offer minimum wage jobs with no health insurance benefits."

State Senator Sue Wilson-Beffort

When payments to providers are low, wages will necessarily be low. Federal guidelines suggest that child care assistance rates be set no less than the 75th percentile of the local market rate. As of 2004, New Mexico provider rates fell short of this mark.[22]

The Quality of New Mexico's Early Care and Education Programs

New Mexico provides child care subsidies only to homes and centers that are registered or licensed. Registered providers meet a minimal level of quality, reflecting primarily on the health and safety of the children, whereas licensed homes and centers must meet other quality standards that address the social, emotional and cognitive development of children, as well as health and safety.

CYFD recently has implemented a new five-star quality rating system, "Reach for the Stars," with stars denoting progressively higher levels of quality achieved by a given ECE provider. This system is intended to help parents make more informed choices about where to enroll their infants and toddlers. For each rating above one star, the licensed home or center receives an additional $25 per child per month from CYFD.[23]

At present, there are 4,985 children receiving subsidized care from licensed providers that have at least a two-star rating. Based on that number, approximately $3.7 million will be paid for higher quality in the 2006 fiscal year.[24]

Researchers agree that quality programs are more likely to have teachers and administrators with college degrees.

In New Mexico, only 23 percent of center-based teachers and administrators have a college degree, putting the state at the bottom of those surveyed.

Only 5 percent of home-based child care workers have a college degree in New Mexico. Across the country this ranges from 4 to 20 percent.[25]

DEFINING QUALITY IN EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS

The lack of standardized quality indicators across states makes system comparisons extremely challenging. Unlike quality for higher levels of education, quality in ECE is far less defined.

A recent literature review of early care and education by the National Center for Children in Poverty[26] found that the best predictors of high-quality infant and toddler care giving were lower adult-to-child ratios and smaller group sizes. The study identified positive care givers as individuals who were sensitive, warm, responsive, and cognitively stimulating. Other predictors of high-quality care were having non-authoritarian beliefs about child rearing, and clean, safe, uncluttered physical environments with developmentally appropriate toys and learning materials.[27]

Another study[28] showed that as toddlers approached 36 months of age, the positive characteristics of the caregiver (non-authoritarian beliefs, more formal education, and more experience in child care) linked even more closely with improved quality of care.

The literature review by the National Center for Children in Poverty echoes earlier reviews. In 2002, the Maternal and Child Health Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services concluded that research "clearly demonstrates the importance of maintaining appropriate child-to-staff ratios and group sizes. Child-to-staff ratios and group sizes are two of the best indicators for determining the quality of a child care program and they significantly affect many other health and safety issues."[29] Other research has demonstrated that higher levels of caregiver formal education, specialized training, and recent child-related training also contribute to higher quality care. [30]

As mentioned, quality care has a positive impact on cognitive and emotional development. Researchers with the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and 14 universities around the country studied children who attend child care centers that meet the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) standards for quality. Researchers found that these children scored higher on school readiness and language tests and had fewer behavioral problems than did their peers in centers not meeting those standards.[31]

Several professional organizations and government agencies have integrated these research findings into more precise quality standards for ECE programs. Recommendations from three of these groups are captured in the following tables.

TABLE 5

Teacher-Child Ratios within Group Size

As Required by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)[32]

For futher clarification, please see notes below	Group Size						
Age of Children	6	8	10	12	14	16	18
Infant Accreditation Strand (birth to 15 months)	1:3	1:4					
12-28 months	1:3	1:4	1:4*	1:4			
21-36 months		1:4	1:5	1:6			
2.5-year-olds - 3-year-olds (30-48 months)				1:6	1:7	1:8	1:9

*In a mixed-age preschool class of 2.5 to 5 years olds, up to 20% of children 2.5 to 3 years old may be enrolled. The ratios within group size for the predominant age group apply. If infants and toddlers are in a mixed-age group, the ratio for the youngest child applies. "Teachers" include teachers, assistant teachers, and teacher aides. Age ranges are approximate and tentative pending further consideration by the NAEYC Academy for Early Childhood Program Accreditation. *Group sizes of 10 or more for 12 to 28-month-olds require an additional adult.*

NAEYC recommendations for adult-to-children ratios and group size are contingent on child-specific factors. For example, ratios are lowered when children need additional adult assistance to fully participate in the program due to disability, language fluency, developmental age and/or stage, or other factors. For the purposes of the group-size criterion, a group size refers to the number of children assigned for most of the day to a teacher or teaching team who occupies an individual classroom or well-defined space that prevents intermingling of children from different groups within a larger room or area. Group sizes as stated are ceilings regardless of the number of staff.

TABLE 6

Staff-to-Child Ratio and Group Size for Centers

As Recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)[33]

	Staff to Child Rations for Group Size			
AGE OF CHILDREN	**6**	**8**	**10**	**16**
Birth to 12 months	1:3	1:4		
31-35 months			1:5	
3 year olds				1:7

The AAP also recommends that directors of ECE centers have a college degree in the field.

In addition to making recommendations about the ratios of adults to children and group size for center-based care, the American Association of Pediatrics also has tackled the thornier, but just as critical, issue of ratios in family-based care operations (table 7). The AAP standards are fairly stringent and recommend that no family-based center have more than two children if both are under two years old. Few, if any states, including New Mexico, have adopted this prudent, stricter standard.

TABLE 7
Staff-to-Child Ratio and Group Size for Family Child Care
As Recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics[34]

Number and Age of Children	Staff: Child Ration
If no children under age 2	1:6
When there is 1 child under age 2	1:4
When there are 2 children under age 2	No other children are recommended

The United States Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) commissioned a study leading to recommendations on quality ECE (table 8).

TABLE 8
Staff-to-Child Ratios Recommended by the
United States Department of Health and Human Services (2002)[35]

Age	Staff: Child ratio	Maximum group size
Birth-12 months	1:3	6
13-24 months	1:3	6
25-30 months	1:4	8
31-35 months	1:5	10
3 year olds	1:7	14

All three sets of standards - NAEYC, AAP, and DHHS - recommend staff-to-child ratios that are significantly lower than those specified under the New Mexico Child Care Regulations (tables 9, 10, and 11). New Mexico regulations also permit larger group sizes and, when age groups are mixed, a higher staff-to-child ratio.

TABLE 9

Staff-to-Child Ratios Permitted by New Mexico Child Care Regulations

Ratios When Children are Grouped by Age[36]

Age in Group	Staff: Child ratio Star Level 1-3	Maximum group size Star Level 4-5
Six weeks to 24 months	1:6	1:5
Two year olds	1:10	1:8
Three year olds	1:12	1:10

TABLE 10

Staff-to-Child Ratios Permitted by New Mexico Child Care Regulations

Ratios When Age Groups are Combined[37]

Age in Group	Staff: Child Rations	
	Star Level 1-3	Star Level 4-5
Six weeks to 24 months	1:6	1:5
Two, three, & four year olds	1:12	1:8
Three, four, & five year olds	1:14	1:10

TABLE 11

Maximum Group Size Permitted by New Mexico Child Care Regulations[38]

Age of Children	Maximum Group Size
6 weeks to 24 months	10
2 year olds	16
3 year olds	24

Financial incentives are an effective method of improving quality. CYFD has used increased reimbursement schedules to persuade child care providers to lower their staff-to-child ratios. For example, a five-star program will only receive higher per-child reimbursements if it has one to two fewer children for each staff person (depending on the age of the children). However, even at the five-star level, a program is allowed to have a staff-to-infant ratio of 1:5, while the NAEYC, AAP, and DHHS guidelines all consider unacceptable any ratio above 1:4. For older children, New Mexico's highest level of quality child care licensure permits ratios of 1:8 for two year olds, but the national guidelines call for ratios no higher than 1:6.

Establishing a quality early care and education program requires setting and maintaining standards for group size, ratio of staff to children, teacher training and qualification. While licensed providers complain that they are over-regulated, it could be argued that registered providers, who meet less stringent quality standards, are not regulated enough and are not held to standards that could result in higher quality early education. Moreover, many children receive unregulated, informal care. The quest to improve quality throughout New Mexico's ECE system must include strategies to reach ***all*** providers.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM OTHERS

The International Experience

Many of the world's countries include early care and education as part of the complete education system, and, like primary and secondary education, it is universal, free, and held to certain standards. However, in the United States, ECE is expensive and only subsidized for low-income families. In New Mexico, the cost for quality child care can be $500 or more per month, or $6,000 per year, double the cost of full-time tuition at the University of New Mexico for one year. Families who need ECE are often younger and have not reached their full earning capacity. Indeed, the costs of quality ECE are even more burdensome than the costs of college tuition later on. At the same time, many of these families' incomes are too high to qualify for child care assistance.[39] Sometimes, they are forced to choose affordable, but poor quality child care.

The state's failure to invest in quality ECE that is available to all families, regardless of income, has had serious repercussions. This is evidenced by low academic performance,[40] elevated high school dropout rates,[41] and low literacy rates among more than half of the population over age 16.[42] The impact on the state's economy is a median wage well below that of neighboring Arizona, Colorado, or Utah.[43]

In contrast, other countries have long supported high quality, universally available ECE. Sweden, for example, has funded child care at the federal level for almost one hundred years, and its ECE program is considered one of the most advanced in the world. Studies repeatedly and consistently have found that girls and boys who spend their earliest years in Sweden's publicly managed child care system grow to be creative, socially confident, and independent adolescents.[44]

The Nordic countries also are known to support strong parent-teacher relationships and encourage parental involvement at school. In Finland, as in all Nordic countries, child care is characterized by a respect for the rights of the child. Finland uses a national curriculum guideline for early care and education.[45] Norway has an Ombudsman for the Children who makes sure the interests of children are being promoted. In France, the staff in ECE programs is expected to work on strengthening non-hierarchical relationships with parents, adapt to diverse family needs and circumstances, and generally make parents feel welcome.[46] In these countries, employers' parental leave policies also allow for greater parental involvement in a child's schooling. Italy has a world-famous program in the town of Reggio-Emilia.[47] It is discussed in detail on page 20.

Many non-European countries emphasize the importance of early education. Cuba has a national system of child care centers and early childhood and pre-school programs that reach virtually all of the children from birth to age six. China also has exemplary ECE programs.[48]

Many of the most successful ECE programs are funded solely with public monies, just like the primary and secondary education systems are in the United States. That is, in many other countries, understanding of child development and early learning dynamics translates directly into public policy that targets funding where it is most effective: the early years.

In addition to understanding the importance of quality ECE, countries with universal, publicly funded ECE are countries that value social capital. They view family and community supports as higher priorities than does the United States, where individualism and parental responsibility come first. In these nations, children are considered "little citizens." In the U.S., children, especially the youngest ones, are more likely to be considered the sole responsibility of their parents. The idea of public investment in young children's education is undermined by the concept that parents alone are responsible for their children's early learning.

When the debate centers on quality ECE for very young children, the issue of a "publicly funded" system often runs into controversy. In the U.S, this would exclude any religious teaching. However, the popularity of child care centers affiliated with religious organizations suggests that some parents believe young children need moral grounding, and that the quality of education received in a religiously affiliated child care setting is more valuable than what may be available secularly.

For the most part, underlying tensions between the roles of church and state in determining educational curricula have been resolved in countries with quality ECE systems. In the U.S., this debate is very much alive. It highlights not only conflicts about the role of parents, religion, and the state in the education of young children, but also the conflicting meaning of public finance.

The inability to come to terms with what a publicly financed system entails is a barrier to making significant progress in improving ECE. This keeps salaries low and quality substandard. On a more practical level, the lack of public investment in universal ECE may be contributing to the U.S.'s declining academic performance compared to other nations.

Early childhood education also can help to reduce poverty by improving educational outcomes. A study of poor Brazilian girls demonstrated the cost return of ECE. Poor girls who had attended pre-school were twice as likely to reach the 5th grade and three times as likely to reach the 8th grade as were girls who had not attended pre-school.[49] Research indicates that the strongest effects of quality care are found with at-risk children - children from families with the fewest resources and under the greatest stress. Currently, New Mexico's income gap is widening. For example, income inequality levels in Santa Fe are reaching those found in Latin America.[50] A recent report found that the top 20 percent of wage-earners make seven to eight times more than the lowest 20 percent.[51] Jobs that require low-level skills are diminishing, while the jobs that require more education and skills are increasing.[52] Clearly New Mexico needs to prepare its young people - many of whom are from low-income families - for the higher-skilled jobs. Social policies that could bring at-risk and poor children along into the future - like quality ECE - are lacking. The impact on the entire economy of New Mexico - and not just the lives of the individual children affected - is as yet unacknowledged.

Reggio-Emilia: A Model for New Mexico?

One of the world's most highly acclaimed ECE programs is in Reggio-Emilia, Italy. The program serves children throughout the city and is a model of parental and community support for ECE. Since 1963, the city has made significant investments in ECE. Currently, 10 to 12 percent of city revenues are spent on early education. This investment supports a system of care for about half of the children from four months to six years old. The citizens of Reggio-Emilia believe that investing in their children is a wise policy. The schools are founded on the principle that all children are strong, capable, resourceful and powerful, which sets the stage for the work teachers and parents do.

A key to the high quality of the schools is an extensive system of on-site staff support, including a system of *pedogogisti* (educational coordinators) who work with teachers and families in each school to help all teachers improve their understanding of children. This in-the-field support for teaching staff is an essential part of ensuring high quality care in the Reggio-Emilia schools—emphasizing the abilities of the child and the idea that teachers should respond to the children as they find them, rather than categorizing children by developmental capability. Each child's educational experience is tailored to his/her developmental stage, regardless of the child's age. This individual approach to a child's learning experience sets the Reggio-Emilia program apart in the world.

The Experience of Other American States

While it may be more relevant to look within the United States for examples of successes in quality ECE, there is a significant variation of commitment. Some states make significant investments, while others make only the minimum required for access to federal funding. In recent years, funding for kindergarten and pre-kindergarten has risen sharply in many states, while funding for younger children has lagged.

States considered leaders in ECE - Massachusetts, Connecticut, Minnesota, and New Hampshire - have made early education and its funding a priority for many years. While it is not possible to directly correlate 4th and 8th grade reading and math proficiency scores with ECE investments, it is noteworthy that the states with high reading and math proficiency scores also have made significant investments in ECE. In contrast, New Mexico has made very little investment in ECE and also has extremely low reading and math proficiency scores.

TABLE 12
Comparison of Reading and Math Proficiency Scores[53]

State	Overall KIDS COUNT rank in '05	% of 4th Graders with Reading Proficiency	% of 4th Graders with Math Proficiency	% of 8th Graders with Reading Proficiency	% of 8th Graders with Math Proficiency
New Hampshire	1	40%	43%	40%	35%
Minnesota	3	37%	42%	37%	44%
Massachusetts	6	40%	41%	43%	38%
Connecticut	11	43%	41%	37%	35%
New Mexico	**46**	**19%**	**17%**	**20%**	**15%**
USA Average		30%	31%	30%	27%

Note: While New Mexico's overall ranking is 46th, its ranking for 4th and 8th grade reading and math scores vary between 49th and 50th. Sometimes New Mexico places last or comes out one step above Mississippi.

Some states have made recent changes in ECE policy and funding. Iowa tripled its investment in early care, while Kansas changed its staff-to-child ratio from 1:6 to 1:3. In 2004, Florida appropriated $400 million for pre-kindergarten programs. Other states made more modest, but significant investments, including Arkansas (increased funding by $60 million in the last two years), Illinois (increased funding by $90 million over three years), and Louisiana and Tennessee (both increased funding by $20 million).

Another notable success story is the United States military's child care program, which had a reputation for poor quality. Underlying the decision to aggressively improve the quality of ECE in military life was the recognition of the importance that military families attached to safe and quality care for their young children. Standards were improved, funding and training increased, and an aggressive timetable was implemented. Within a decade, the military's ECE program became a model for high quality care.

Crucial to model programs, whether in particular states or in the military, is the commitment to change, an aggressive timetable for implementation, and the funding necessary to fully implement developmentally appropriate, high-quality ECE.

Lower ratios and class sizes, qualified teachers and staff who are supported in their daily work, and a safe, stimulating, developmentally appropriate environment and curriculum are the basic building blocks to any successful *quality* early care and education program.

The Political and Economic Landscape in New Mexico:

Bringing About Change

Making the case for a state-funded, high-quality early care and education program includes more than just changing the discussion from babysitting to education. It also means demonstrating that this is the right course of action - both fiscally prudent and morally correct.

Legislative debates about quality ECE usually are framed in context of funding child care subsidies. The debates are complicated when child care is defined according to widely ranging individual experiences. If child care is equated with babysitting, then the low wages paid to child care workers is understandable. When child care embraces early education, it can be considered a direct challenge to strongly held beliefs about the role of parents.

Policy in this arena lags behind changing social and economic norms. Often both parents work outside of the home, and in the growing numbers of single-parent families the head of household has no choice but to work. [54] In these situations, parents are not able to provide the care and education their young children need. If these children are not to be neglected, then the gap between what parents traditionally have been able to do and what they are now prevented from doing, by the necessity of earning a living, needs to be filled. The hours available for learning experiences with small children are seriously compromised by a full day at work. At the same time, there still is reluctance to have the government transgress into areas traditionally reserved for parents.

One of the toughest challenges facing ECE advocates is how to talk about ECE in a way that moves the debate from babysitting to quality early care and education. The term "education" has its own problems because it conjures up images of school desks, strict discipline, and rigid curricula. Early learning is more about socialization and developmentally appropriate emotional and cognitive learning through play. While ECE differs from primary and secondary education, it also is aligned with the more formal educational system by enhancing learning and preparing children for school.

The other question that must be answered for legislators is the fiscal prudence of publicly funding universal, free or low-cost, quality ECE in much the same way that primary and secondary education is funded. Part of this discussion needs to hinge on two key facts: young children need appropriate cognitive development if they are to reach their full potential; and we are no longer a society that can depend on this learning taking place at home.

The reality of present-day child-rearing - that the majority of young children now spend significant time in child care settings - suggests that publicly supported quality ECE does not infringe upon parental rights.

A state-supported public ECE system will only happen when the *public* is convinced of that need. This means mounting a large-scale public education campaign that describes the cost of failing to finance quality ECE. This, in turn, means demonstrating the connections between poor academic performance, high school dropout rates, an insufficiently skilled and competitive workforce, and the high costs of special education and corrections, while showing how high-quality early care and education can ameliorate these problems.

While legislation was introduced to partially fund pre-kindergarten for four-year-olds in the 2005 and 2006 legislative sessions, it will require far stronger public will to fully fund the pre-K program and move toward universal quality ECE for children from birth to three years of age. The price tag for pre-K education for four-year-olds in New Mexico is estimated to be $59 million annually when fully phased in. Publicly funded quality early care and education can only happen if a significant portion of the population agrees to its financial importance.

In New Mexico, policymakers also are becoming stronger advocates for increased investments in ECE. Lieutenant Governor Diane Denish has championed significant increases in state investments in pre-K and infant and toddler care. The Children's Cabinet, which she chairs, has made ECE a high priority, and former CYFD Secretary Mary Dale Bolson also was a strong advocate of high-quality early learning.

In his 2002 gubernatorial campaign, Governor Bill Richardson promised to restore eligibility for child care assistance to 200 percent FPL, and he recently has reaffirmed that he wants to increase funding incrementally and eventually restore eligibility to this level. Unfortunately, no progress was made in the January 2006 legislative session. Nonetheless, the governor designated 2006 as the Year of the Child, and advocates are still optimistic that this should provide an opportunity for a public discussion on the importance of ECE. Within the Legislature, Senator Linda Lopez and Representatives

Rhonda King and Lucky Varela have championed ECE in the recent past. Senator Sue Wilson-Beffort also has been a strong supporter of ECE professionals and of supports for working parents.

Issues Around Universal ECE and Home-Based, Rural and Pre-K Programs

New Mexico has a high percentage of relative- or family-based child care. In some cases, these situations reflect the desire to have one's children cared for by someone sharing the same culture and values. However, often the "choice" of family-based care is based on pure economics: families cannot afford center-based care, or, a family member has a registered family-based operation and the child care subsidies supplement the total family income. The advantage of a family-based child care setting is that when adult-to-child ratios are small, infants and young children may get more attention and stimulation. On the other hand, center-based care is likely to provide more developmentally appropriate care. The challenge and goal is to bring together the best of both in every setting.

Relative- or family-based child care probably is more prevalent in rural areas of the state where there are fewer center-based providers. To address this reality, CYFD is piloting a program in southern New Mexico where mothers who agree to stay home with their small children are paid each month an amount comparable to what CYFD would have paid a registered family-based provider to care for the child. This pilot project obviates the need for child care for some mothers also receiving TANF support. These mothers are educated about their child's developmental stages, so they are able to provide their children with consistent, nurturing care.

In non-rural settings, the implementation of voluntary state-funded four-year-old pre-kindergarten programs may cause a financial challenge for some child care centers. Because adult-to-child ratios are much lower for infants and toddlers than they are for four-year-olds, many centers subsidize their infant and toddler programs with income from their four-year-old enrollment. If that enrollment drops - because children are in the pre-K programs instead - the centers may experience financial hardship.

Some policymakers are concerned that funding for pre-kindergarten programs will short-change ECE. In FY2006, ECE programs lost $2.3 million in funding while pre-kindergarten programs gained $5 million, though a direct connection was not drawn. A broad early childhood agenda needs to demonstrate the value of supporting pre-K programs, raising child care assistance levels, and making quality improvements to ECE. These three elements should all be part of one large and interconnected early childhood agenda.

The economic repercussions of changing to a publicly financed system for ECE is not inconsequential, but it is still feasible. On an individual level, private providers will be displaced and home-based providers may be unable to fill their available slots with children. Nonetheless, there are broad economic benefits to consider. Standardizing the quality of care and requiring more education and training in order to teach young children will open a career path and jobs that currently do not exist. The need for better educated teachers and support staff will stimulate universities and community colleges to developing training courses and certificate programs. The result will be a newly trained and educated workforce, which, in turn, will help stimulate the economy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Long-Term Recommendations: Publicly Funded, Accessible, Affordable, High-Quality Infant and Toddler Programs

The best course of action for New Mexico would be the establishment of affordable, high-quality ECE, accessible to all. Without making out-of-home ECE compulsory, the state could bring adult-to-child ratios and group size in line with current research, improve teacher training, and pay teachers salaries that reflect their importance. The results would be improved productivity of working parents and a boost to New Mexico's economy. The state's universities would train more ECE educators, and children would benefit. This would result in future savings to the state through lower expenditures for special education, grade retention and incarceration. Better test scores and higher educational attainment would translate into better jobs with higher earnings and more tax revenue for the state.

The current ECE system, where families seek the least expensive providers, has a considerable social cost. It keeps children from achieving their full potential. Moving child care to an affordable, accessible, high-quality ECE system would be expensive initially, but some of the costs could be met by extending the current sliding scale child care subsidy to higher income levels. At a minimum, policymakers should support a study of the costs and benefits of creating an affordable, accessible, high quality early care and education system. Having state-specific data would allow for an educated public debate on this critical issue.

Raising the quality of ECE would also remedy one of the ironies of the current system. While the state wants to encourage low-income workers to make more money to become less reliant on state subsidies, like child care, the current system keeps families in lower-wage jobs. That is because most low-wage families are paid hourly wages, which generally are only increased in small increments, from $6.00 per hour to $6.50 or even $7.00 per hour, for example. While a raise of $1.00 per hour is significant, it is only $176 per month. However, even a small increase in wages can result in a loss of child care assistance because the top eligibility level is a fixed amount—currently 150 percent of the Federal Poverty Level. Anyone earning more than that does not qualify for assistance. Often, the amount of child care assistance a family loses is greater than the value of the increased wages. The result is that families, but particularly single mothers, often decline wage increases in fear of losing child care assistance.

The current eligibility system clearly is counter-productive to good state policy, but a solution is complex. As noted, the current income eligibility ceiling is 150 percent FPL, far below a family-sustaining wage. The state has two choices: raise the eligibility ceiling to a level that does not punish working families for making more money; or make allowances in current eligibility so families could continue to get child care assistance for a defined period of time as their income rises above the eligibility threshold. While it would be possible to craft policy in line with the second recommendation, the result would be that only families currently receiving assistance could work their way out of poverty, while families who have been excluded from the system would not have the same opportunity. Those families would be left to seek the least expensive–and likely the poorest quality–ECE for their children, which, once again, is not the best state policy.

Two important steps are necessary to move toward a long-term goal of publicly funded, quality ECE:

- A social marketing campaign aimed at educating the public about the need for quality, publicly financed ECE; and
- A study of the costs of implementing an affordable, accessible, high-quality ECE program in New Mexico. The study should include some discussion of financing options (e.g., increasing the disbursement of the permanent funds, increased property taxes, etc.)

Short-Term Recommendations: Interim Steps to Repair the Current System

While the best policy would be to create affordable, accessible, high-quality ECE system, a number of short-term policies will help improve the availability and affordability of ECE. These include:

Raising the eligibility level for child care assistance to at least 250 percent of the Federal Poverty Level.

If this cannot be accomplished in one legislative session, then policymakers should consider a phase-in over no more than three years. This could be accomplished in stages from 151 to 175 percent, 176 to 200 percent, and, finally to 250 percent. The estimated cost to increase child care assistance eligibility to 175 percent FPL is $9,532,214. The estimated cost to increase eligibility from 150 to 200 percent FPL is $10,268,212.[55] The additional cost of raising it from 200 to 250 percent FPL is likely to be far less than the $10 million needed to raise eligibility from 150 to 200 percent FPL, as parents in this income range need less assistance.

Implementing a state policy to transition families out of child care assistance when their incomes rise.

As discussed above, the unintended consequences of keeping working families in lower-wage jobs because of the defined top limit on child care assistance needs to be addressed. If the state moves the eligibility threshold closer to a self-sustaining wage, it should then extend child care assistance for a period of time after income exceeds the allowable eligibility limits. Even incremental steps would be an improvement over current policy. The phase-out of child care assistance during this transition period could be the subject of a memorial or further study by CYFD in collaboration with early care and education advocates, so that any such plan is both cost efficient for the state and most helpful for the affected families.

Increasing funding for quality initiatives.

The state should seek funds to increase the quality rating of all child care providers. There are 8,590 children receiving care from licensed providers that have received a rating of only one star, which designates the lowest quality of care. Supporting and encouraging these providers to move to the next star level or higher would require increased funding to the Aim High program. Once providers have moved to a higher level of quality, increasing the reimbursement rates for them by an additional $25 per child per month would cost approximately $2.6 million per year.[56]

Amending the New Mexico Child Care Licensing Regulations to meet national standards for staff-to-child ratios and group size.

Even though New Mexico's standards have improved with the implementation of CYFD's Reach for the Stars quality initiative, the standards still fall short. Staff-to-child ratios and group size are two of the most important indicators of quality ECE, and New Mexico should move aggressively to bring its child care regulations in line with nationally recognized standards.

Increase the rates paid to providers for infant care.

Low CYFD child care payment rates for infants, combined with required lower ratios for infants and the implementation of pre-K programs, makes it harder for providers to care for infants. Many child care centers are dropping their infant care, and many areas of the state now report waiting lists for the youngest children. At the same time, demand for infant care continues to increase. If the rates paid for infant care increase, so will quality. This would ensure that care is readily available.

Providing financial support to other quality initiatives.

The T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood ® Scholastic program, the phase-in of a WAGE$ supplement program ($2 million), and additional support for Aim High ($2 million) and Accreditation ($100,000) should all be priorities. T.E.A.C.H. is a state-funded scholarship program for individuals seeking a degree in early childhood education. In other states, but not yet New Mexico, WAGE$ is a state-funded wage supplement program for those in the ECE workforce. CYFD has recently released its House Memorial 22 report[57] on wage and benefit supplements to the ECE workforce, which examines the benefits of a WAGE$ program. The Legislative Health and Human Services Interim Committee supported funding of a WAGE$ program, but recommended spending only $1 million on the first year's initial phase-in.

Combining the necessity for both child care and pre-kindergarten in all legislative efforts.

Quality pre-kindergarten programming can take place in child care centers, thereby supporting and strengthening infant and toddler care in the process. In the debate over pre-K we should consider the adequate funding and support of education for younger children. Pre-K could potentially harm ECE because:

- Funding for pre-K may mean less funding for child care providers;
- Ratios for four-year-olds are higher than those for infants and toddlers, so in most child care settings the profit margin is higher for four-year-old care. As this older group is pulled into state-funded pre-K programs, child care providers may experience a financial pinch; and
- Teacher pay is greater for pre-K, which means that quality teachers may be drawn away from ECE and into pre-K settings.

Creating a more constructive regulatory process to support relative and family care through increased reimbursement, additional resources, training, and site visits.

While often left out of any discussion of ECE, the reality is that many infants and toddlers are in relative or family care that is unregulated or doesn't meet minimal health and safety requirements. Improving the quality of these providers is a critical part of improving ECE in New Mexico. Programs like First Born of Grant County, which offers universal, voluntary home visiting for first-time parents in the first three years, can significantly improve parental care.

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[19] "Research on Preschool Teachers with Degrees," fact sheet from National Institute for Early Education Research, issue no.1, Dec. 2003. Found at: <http://nieer.org/resources/factsheet/5.pdf>
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[35] United States Department of Health and Human Services. <www.acf.hhs.gov>

[36] New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department. Child Care Regulations. Title 8, Chapters 15-17.

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[38] Ibid.

[39] At present, child care assistance is available to families with incomes below 150 percent of the federal poverty level. For a family of three, this would equal $24,135 in 2005.

[40] New Mexico has some of the lowest 4th and 8th grade math, science, and reading scores in the nation. Annie E. Casey Foundation (2005). *2005 KIDS COUNT Data: State Profiles of Child Well-Being*. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

[41] *Ibid.*

[42] Estimates are provided from the National Institute for Literacy based on algorithms that use data from the 1992 National Assessment of Adult Literacy and the 1990 Decennial Census. This analysis is expected to be updated soon. <www.nifl.gov/reders/reder.htm>

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[50] Santa Fe County's Gini coefficient is 0.503, similar to that of Argentina. Sherri L. Alderman and Kelly O'Donnell, *New Mexico Bare Bones Budget* (Albuquerque: New Mexico Voices for Children, 2003), p.10.
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[52] "2005 Skills Gap Report: A Survey of the American Manufacturing Workforce," (Deloitte, National Association of Manufacturers, and the Manufacturing Institute). Found in: <www.nam.org/2005skillsgap>

[53] Annie E. Casey Foundation (2005). *2005 KIDS COUNT Data Book: State Profiles of Child Well-Being*. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

[54] Thirty-six percent of New Mexico's children live in single-parent households, while the national average is 30 percent. However, New Mexico ranks last among all states with respect to the percentage of female- headed households (24 percent) that receive child support. Data from Annie E. Casey Foundation.

[55] Personal communication with CYFD, October 2005.

[56] Communication with CYFD. October 2005.

[57] CYFD. House Memorial 22 Report to the Health and Human Services Interim Committee. November 28, 2005.

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