

Policy Brief #11

**The Importance of Early Childhood Education:
 A Promising Way Forward for New Mexico**

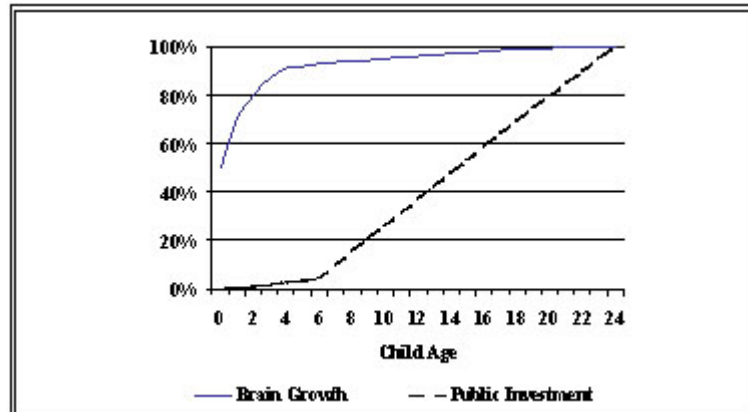
New Mexico's children face significant challenges. As a state, we have high rates of poverty, single-parent households, high school drop-outs, and teenage pregnancy; as well as some of the nation's lowest test scores. Too many of our young people are failing. As a result, they are confined to low-wage jobs and lives of poverty. If this situation is to change, efforts must commence with our youngest children.

Scientific research tells us that the earliest years of life are crucial for brain growth and the development of cognitive, behavioral, and emotional skills. Eighty-five percent of basic brain growth occurs by age four - long before spending on education generally begins. (See graph 1)

We must take advantage of the extraordinary learning window open in the first years of life if more New Mexican children are to develop their full potential. A young child who receives nurturing, stimulating, and appropriate care is far more likely to achieve later success. When parents are educated and able to provide the best for their children, families succeed. Early education can transform lives. It is also a cost-effective way to build a healthier society.

Investments in early education show extraordinary rates of return. There are few investment sectors that are able to demonstrate social and economic benefits of such a magnitude. Robert G. Lynch, in

GRAPH 1
 Brain Development and Investment of
 Public Dollars for Education¹



his article *Early Childhood Investment Yields Big Payoff*, notes that the immediate impact of high quality early education is improved academic achievement. Children do better on tests, have richer vocabularies, less need for remedial education, better high school graduation rates, fewer teenage pregnancies, and even improved health and nutrition. As adults, they are more likely to make positive contributions to society, be employed, and pay taxes. They are also less likely to commit crimes, be incarcerated, or addicted to drugs.² Children who have a high quality early education are in a better position to help repair our often-torn social fabric.

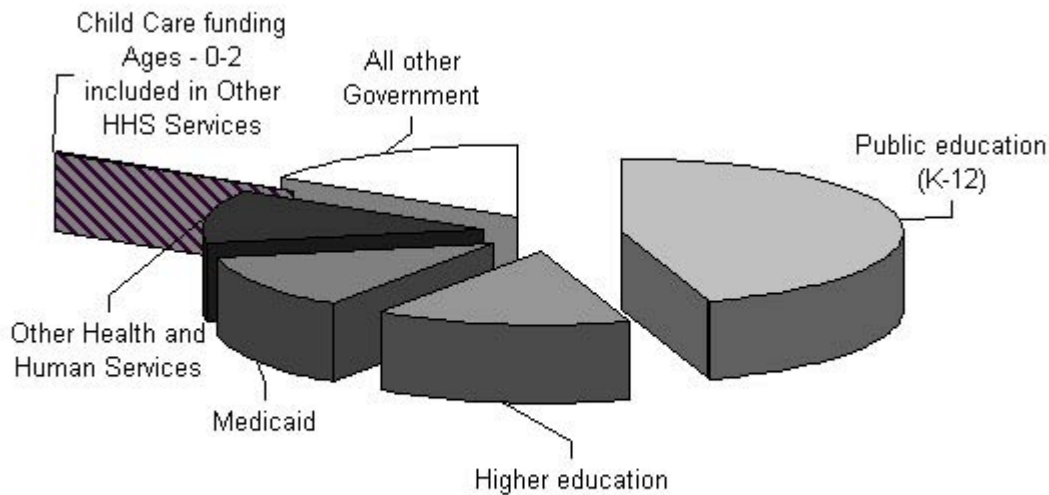
New Mexico's income gap is widening. In Santa Fe County, income inequality levels are reaching those found in Latin America.³ A recent report found that the top 20 percent of wage-earners make seven to

eight times more than the lowest 20 percent.⁴ According to the National Association of Manufacturers, jobs that require low-level skills are diminishing, while those requiring more education and skills are increasing.⁵ Clearly, we need to prepare our young people for a higher-skilled future.

Education is one of the most effective ways of decreasing income inequality, and increasing social cohesion. If quality programs are universally implemented, the U.S. may be able to attain more of the positive social indicators that other developed nations enjoy including less violence, a lower incarceration rate, a more literate populace, and a more equal distribution of income.

Despite the extraordinary potential of early care and education, it receives only 0.25 percent of the general fund, a tiny slice of the state's budget.⁶

GRAPH 2
FY 2006 Recurring State General Fund Appropriations

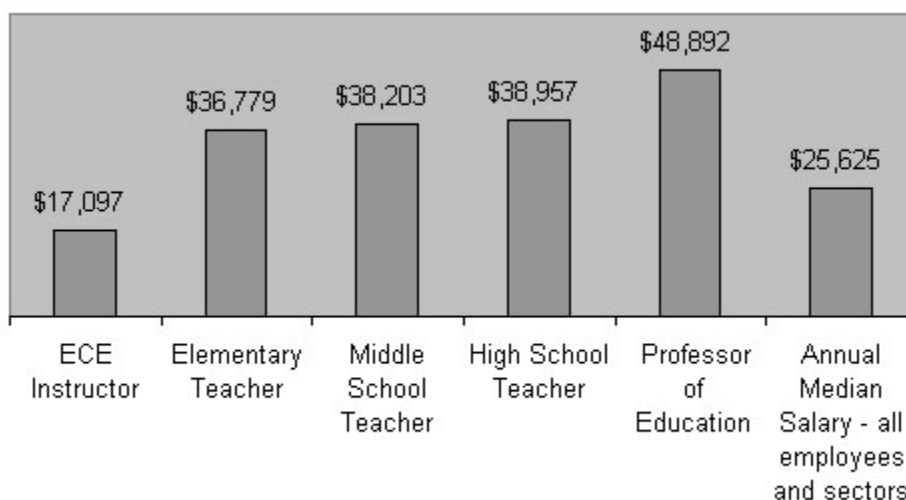


Wages in the ECE Employment Sector

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.⁷ 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. 2004⁸



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. 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, generally the income equated with the beginning of middle class status. For those providing home-based care in New Mexico, a staggering 60 percent live below this level.⁹

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.¹⁰ In New Mexico, ECE teachers make less than \$18,000 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 such a low-paid workforce. 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. This is detrimental to young children's development, as learning best takes place in the context of a nurturing relationship. Bonding is another essential aspect of growth for young children, and cannot take place with adults if their presence is inconsistent. This is particularly crucial for the most high need children. If at-risk infants and toddlers receive child care of such poor quality, it may actually diminish inborn potential and lead to poorer cognitive, social, and emotional developmental outcomes.¹¹

“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

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 this qualification.¹²

A recent literature review of early care and education by the National Center for Children in Poverty¹³ found that the best predictors of high-quality infant and toddler care were lower adult-to-child ratios and smaller group sizes. The study identified positive care-giving as individuals who were sensitive, warm, responsive, and cognitively stimulating. Other predictors of high-quality care were non-authoritarian beliefs about child rearing, and clean, safe, uncluttered physical environments with developmentally appropriate toys and learning materials.¹⁴

A study¹⁵ 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.

What We Can Learn from Others

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.

States that are considered leaders in ECE—Massachusetts, Connecticut, Minnesota, and New Hampshire—have made ECE 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.

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,¹⁶ high school dropout rates,¹⁷ and low literacy rates among more than half of the population over age 16.¹⁸



TABLE 1
Comparison of Reading and Math Proficiency Scores in 2003¹⁹

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 are 49th (above Mississippi) or 50th among the states.

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, 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.

First Born: Grant County's Innovative Program

New Mexico is fortunate to have an innovative program to improve early childhood outcomes through parental education and support. First Born is a voluntary and inexpensive home visiting program available to any first-time parents during the first three years of their child's life. Based at the Gila Regional Medical Center, home visitation starts either during pregnancy or at birth, and may continue until the baby is three years old or until services are complete. First Born nurse home visitors make hospital rounds every day to provide

Lower child to staff ratios and smaller 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.

breastfeeding support and offer each family an initial nurse postpartum home visit. The program encourages the creation and maintenance of resilient families where children receive appropriate, nurturing care. First Born home visitors provide education on a wide range of topics, including: safety, immunization, breastfeeding, infant growth and development, attachment, substance abuse, mental health issues, family planning, domestic violence, child abuse, community resources, father involvement, and discipline techniques.²⁰ The program is able to provide all of these services annually for only \$2,000 per family. The results have been impressive. Participants in First Born improve levels of family functioning, male involvement, parent-child bonding, communication, and interaction. Domestic violence decreases and parents "encourage appropriate child independence and gave love and attention freely to the child."²¹ If all first born children in New Mexico were covered by this initiative, it would cost under \$22 million annually.



The Political and Economic Landscape in New Mexico: Bringing About Change

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 early care and education. This, in turn, means demonstrating the connection between poor quality or no ECE and poor academic performance, high school dropout rates, an insufficiently skilled and competitive workforce, and the high costs of special education and corrections. High-quality early care and education can ameliorate these problems, and the public must be convinced of its urgency.

While pre-kindergarten for four year olds was partially funded in the 2005 and 2006 legislative sessions, it will require far more public will to fully fund that program and move toward universal quality ECE for children from birth to three years of age. Publicly funded quality early care and education will likely only happen if a significant portion of the population understands its importance.



Long-Term Recommendations: Publicly Funded, Accessible, Affordable,

The best course of action for New Mexico would be the establishment of affordable, high-quality ECE, accessible to all. The state should 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 the 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.

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

Increase funding for comprehensive, evidence-based prevention services for first-time pregnant women and new parents.

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

Implement a state policy to help families in the transition out of child care assistance by establishing an exit eligibility level at a higher level than the entrance eligibility level.

Promote greater financial incentives when child care providers increase quality.

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

Increase the rates paid to providers for infant care.

Provide additional financial support to improve ECE teacher training and retention

Combine child care and pre-kindergarten in all legislative efforts.

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

Endnotes

¹ New Mexico Voices for Children (2005). *Early Learning Left Out: Investments by Child Age on Education and Development* fact sheet. Albuquerque: New Mexico Voices for Children. See also: Voices for America’s Children and the Child and Family Policy Center (April 2005). *Early Learning Left Out: Closing the Investment Gap for America’s Youngest Children*. 2nd ed.

² Lynch, Robert G. (2005) *Early Childhood Investment Yields Big Payoff - Policy Perspectives*. San Francisco: West Ed.; and (2004). *Exceptional Returns: Economic, Fiscal and Social Benefits of Investment in Early Childhood Development*. Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute.

³ Santa Fe County’s Gini coefficient is 0.503, similar to that of Argentina. Sherril L. Alderman and Kelly O’Donnell, *New Mexico Bare Bones Budget* (Albuquerque: New Mexico Voices for Children, 2003), p.10.
Found in: <www.nmvoices.org/attachments/bbbfullreport.pdf>
See also: L. Josh Bivens, *Reclaiming an economic future through democracy: A new direction for economic policy in the Americas*, Economic Policy Issue Brief #217, October 25, 2005.
Found in: <www.epinet.org/issuebriefs/217/>

⁴ Jared Bernstein, Elizabeth McNichol, and Karen Lyons, “Pulling Apart: A State-by-State Analysis of Income Trends” (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and Economic Policy Institute, January 2006). Found at: <www.cbpp.org/1-26-06sfp.pdf>.

⁵ “2005 Skills Gap Report: A Survey of the American Manufacturing Workforce,” (Deloitte, National Association of Manufacturers, and the Manufacturing Institute). Found in: <<http://www.nam.org/2005skillsgap>>.

⁶ New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee, *2005 Post-Session Fiscal Review*, May 2005. Found at: <<http://legis.state.nm.us/lcs/lfc/lfcdocs/2005fiscalreview.pdf>>.

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%
(includes child care funding - Ages 0-2)	\$11.748 Million	0.25%
All other Government	\$743 Million	16.00%
Total State General Fund Appropriations	\$4.708 Billion	100.00%

Note: The above table does not include four-year-old pre-K funding of \$5 Million in FY 2006, which was non-recurring funding.

⁷ Phillipsen, L.C. et al. (1997) The prediction of process quality from structural features of child care. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 12(3): 281-303.
< <http://www.childcareresearch.org/location/ccrca489>>

⁸ New Mexico Department of Labor, Bureau of Economic Research and Analysis, Occupational Employment Statistics, found at: <www.dol.state.nm.us/eds/EDS200404/PAGE0001.HTM> and <www.dol.state.nm.us/eds/EDS200404/PAGE0013.HTM>

⁹ Only 43 states had data available for this report.
Herzenberg, S. et al. (2005). *Losing Ground in Early Childhood Education: Declining Workforce Qualifications in an Expanding Industry, 1979-2004*. Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute

¹⁰ “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>>

¹¹ “Quality, Compensation, and Affordability: Position Statement,” National Association for the Education of Young Children. Found at: <www.naeyc.org/about/positions/PSQCA98.asp> op cit. *Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children* (New York: Carnegie Corporation, 1994) and E. Galinsky et al., *The Study of Family Child Care and Relative Care: Highlights of Findings* (New York: Families and Work Institute, 1994).

¹² Herzenberg, S. et al. (2005). *Losing Ground in Early Childhood Education: Declining Workforce Qualifications in an Expanding Industry, 1979-2004*. Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute.

¹³ Kreader, J.L. et al. (2005). *Infant and Toddler Child Care Quality*. New York: National Center for Children in Poverty.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Early Child Care Research Network (2000). Characteristics of quality of child care for toddlers and preschoolers. *Applied Developmental Science*, 4(3):116-135. <www.childcareresearch.org/location/ccrca2460>

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ 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.
<<http://www.nifl.gov/readers/reder.htm>>

¹⁹ Annie E. Casey Foundation (2005). *2005 KIDS COUNT Data Book: State Profiles of Child Well-Being*. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

²⁰ Ivan de la Rosa, Joanne Perry, Lisa E. Dalton, Victoria Johnson, “Strengthening Families with First-Born Children: Exploratory Story of the Outcomes of a Home Visiting Intervention,” *Research on Social Work Practice*, vol. 15, no.5 (September 2005), p.329. The author is grateful to Vicki Johnson of the First Born Program and Susan Herrera of the Los Alamos National Laboratory Foundation for sharing this information.

²¹ Ibid, p.334.

