



Early Childhood Education in Crisis: A Call to Action

Class of 2023 Early Childhood Education Immersion Team:

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Introduction

Early childhood education refers to the care and education of children from birth to age five, a span of time whose short length belies its pivotal importance in brain development - over 90% of brain development occurs by age five. One would think that robust education systems would be in place for a developmental period as important as this; however, our findings show that the Richmond region, like many other regions in the United States, is experiencing an early childhood education crisis years in the making and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with access to childcare in general extremely limited. Access to high-quality programs is often limited only to families at upper income levels, with operating costs making profit margins small to non-existent for all but the largest corporate chains, educators making poverty-level wages, and, most devastatingly of all, many children not equipped with the skills needed to survive, much less thrive, in school and in life.

Scope and Findings

Our learning journey began with a series of interviews of local experts in the field of early childhood education, asking each of them to identify what they saw as the biggest issue, gap, and/or inequity in early childhood education, possible solutions, and recommendations on what our team could do that would make the most impact. *Three issues resoundingly emerged as the major problems driving the early childhood education crisis: the knowledge gap, a lack of access and therefore equity, and challenges in recruitment and retention of early childhood workers.*

The knowledge gap applies to the education and information needed by three constituencies:

Families/parents need to know about the importance of early childhood education, the financial assistance programs available to them, and how to navigate the options for care; early childhood education providers need more supports around running a business and licensing complexities, changing employee and customer needs, and the financial assistance programs available for business owners; and early childhood workers need to understand the critical importance of this career, and to be connected to training and professional development opportunities.

An extreme **lack of access** exists across all price points, locations, work schedules, and methods of delivery - in-home, center, school-based, religious/secular, curricula.

This lack of access has a disproportionate negative impact based on race, socioeconomic level, gender, ability, and geography.

Challenges in recruitment and retention of early childhood education workers were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lack of respect for the field coupled with low wages and lack of benefits, as well as the aforementioned knowledge gap around resources for business owners as well as workers, has contributed to this being one of the most volatile hiring and staffing environments across all employment sectors.

Recommendations and Call to Action

Many solutions already exist and are being implemented but must be expanded. First and foremost, **everyone** must learn about and understand the critical importance of early childhood education on brain growth and child development. In addition to investing in children being the right thing to do from a moral standpoint, every dollar invested in access to early childhood education benefits all of us - through reduced crime, less remediation needed in schools, more people able to work, and children with the skills and ability to thrive and participate in civic society. Secondly, because the health and success of our cities, states, and nation are dependent on our children's ability to thrive in the moment and in the future, **government funding for early childhood education must be maintained** and much more work needs to be done to ensure that parents/families making up to \$80,000 annual household income know that they are eligible for **financial assistance for early childhood education**. Additionally, both early childhood education business owners and workers need to be made aware of the existing **opportunities and incentives** for education, credentialing, and professional development.

The early childhood education crisis also demands new, innovative, and creative solutions and the will to implement them. These include **full public funding** at the local, state and federal levels for early childhood education - *including targeting funding to increased wages for workers*. **The private sector also must invest in early childhood education as a way to invest in their employees and the success of their businesses** - options include everything from offering childcare stipends and pre-tax dependent care financial spending accounts to offering childcare onsite. Similar to other essential trades and professions such as HVAC and nursing, **the pipeline of early childhood education workers must be expanded** through career/technical education and workforce development programs, which could also be connected to other pipelines to address worker shortages in other fields, such as for K-12 educators.

When early childhood education is a viable market - which is achievable through public and private investment - this will have the ripple effect of expanding access to high quality early childhood education providers for parents/families in all geographic areas, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic level, that meet the varied needs of families and children in scheduling, disability support, and methodology options. When families have access to quality affordable early childhood education options, parents can and do enter the workforce, which is necessary for a healthy economy and, ultimately, a vibrant society.

Resolving the early childhood education crisis will require creativity and collaboration from stakeholders - ***and we are all stakeholders*** - in order to tackle the complex nature of the problem and the multi-faceted solutions that are necessary to resolve it. And resolve it we must: every facet of our society - from health to public safety to individual financial stability to the strength of our economy and everything in between - depends on ensuring that children receive quality education during these crucial first five years of life.

Interviews/Sources: Ann Payes, Thrive: Birth to Five; Toria Edmonds-Howell, Capital One; David Young, Friends Association for Children; Janet Burke, ChildSavers; Emily Griffey, Voices for Virginia's Children.