

Child care and early education: Where congress, science, and the public agree ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The spending bill signed into law last Friday includes an unprecedented increase in federal funding for child care and early education. It is an important down payment on larger policy reforms—and one that is grounded in strong research.

In September 2017, Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) and Representative Bobby Scott (D-VA) stood with Democratic leaders Charles E. Schumer (D-NY) and Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) to introduce the Child Care for Working Families Act—the boldest vision for child care reform in decades—to make high-quality child care options affordable to families who need it, improve the quality of care and jobs, and expand public pre-K options. The \$3-billion increase included for child care and early education in the spending bill demonstrates the commitment to see that this vision eventually becomes a reality.¹ But how much money is really needed to guarantee every child a right to high-quality care and early education?

Recently, the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, the collective of private, nonprofit institutions that provides expert advice on related policy problems and solutions, took on the task of estimating that amount. Last month, the National Academies released their pre-publication report that estimates it would take approximately \$140 billion a year, including federal, state, and family contributions, to invest in an early-care and education system that met the needs of all children and families in the United States and pays for high-quality care and a well-compensated workforce. They conservatively conclude that an increase in public funding of about \$53 billion a year over current levels would help reach this vision.² While that may seem like a lot, other developed nations already spend an average of 0.8 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on early care and education, whereas the United States currently spends less than 0.5 percent of GDP. This investment will get the United States closer to competitive with our peers—at 0.75 percent of GDP when fully phased in.

What these other nations recognize is that these investments have both short- and long-term benefits. The National Academies point out in their report that high-quality early care and education is “critical for positive child development and early learning.” It further explains that the benefits are not just for the individual children or families, but go beyond to reach “society at large.” These investments have a significant return for individuals, communities and the economy. As Halley Potter, Andrew Stettner, and I wrote in “Quality Jobs, Quality Care,” today most parents are working, and when parents go to work with the peace of mind that their children are in good hands, they can then be productive employees, and employers reap those rewards. High-quality early care and education programs have been shown to yield higher graduation rates, earnings, and savings. At the same time, paying child-care teachers better will cut down on the need to tap into public benefits to support their families, thereby leading to longer-term economic security.

So, while historic, in some ways last week’s Congressional spending bill seems like a drop in the bucket compared to the vast need. In the short term, the impact will be very real for the tens of thousands of low-paid parents who will now be able to afford better child care options, and the teachers and caregivers who will get a raise as a result of this investment. Right now only one in six children of the 14.2 million children eligible for the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) receives it due to under-funding. The new child care funding for the CCDBG will help close that gap by serving more than 150,000 additional children in low-paid families, and also help states improve the quality, health, and safety of their child care options. This increased funding is a first step toward meeting the full need of the program—and constitutes a down payment on a larger vision to guarantee child care assistance to all families who need it. Too many families are working hard, sometimes multiple jobs, late or long hours, and still can’t afford or find quality child care. And too many child care teachers and caregivers are struggling to make ends meet with pay as low as \$10 an hour.

Prioritizing good child care options—ones that pay teachers well—and that don’t break the bank for parents is not only a Congressional priority and good science: it also resonates with the public.

A 2017 poll from the First Five Years Fund found that 85 percent of voters say there should be increased funding for child care that directly supports greater access to quality programs for low- and middle-income children while their parents work or attend school. While

Democrats in Congress have taken the lead on this, Republicans have gone along too, because this is not a partisan issue. The poll found that 74 percent of Republicans, 79 percent of independents, and 97 percent of Democrats support increased funding.

With this widespread support, investing more in child care and early education is a priority that's time has come. This should only be the beginning of a much larger prioritization to make sure that every family can count on good care for their kids, and that everyone who chooses child care as a profession can count on it being a good job. The next step is to continue the momentum for the Child Care for Working Families Act and make sure all of our children, including the DREAMers—the immigrant children who were left out of the budget deal—are prioritized.

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