

Why early childhood education is a women's rights issue ^[1]

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Source: Cal Matters

Format: Article

Publication Date: 3 Aug 2019

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

In Gavin Newsom, California finally has a governor who gets the need for high quality, accessible early childhood education and care. His budget makes a down payment of nearly \$2 billion addressing the early years.

And yet a recent poll conducted by the Policy Analysis for California Education and the University of Southern California Rossier School of Education shows that California voters rank early childhood spending below other educational priorities.

Why the disconnect?

One reason, some experts believe, could be that the sheer number of people with direct interest in K-12 and higher education outweigh the demographically smaller population of families with children ages 5 and younger.

But what about the sheer numbers of women who are, or have been, or may someday be, mothers? How many women have to sacrifice their careers, their dreams, their livelihoods because their young children have no affordable quality early childcare or preschool options?

Why aren't we counting women?

According to the Center for American Progress, 60% of people in California live in a "childcare desert," defined as a census tract with more than 50 children under age 5 that has no childcare providers or so few that there are three times as many children as licensed child care slots.

When there are options, they are costly. The average annual cost of center-based infant child care is \$16,542, according to Childcare Aware of America. Childcare and programs labeled as preschool for 3-5 year-olds are somewhat less expensive, but still out of reach for many.

While women aren't the only ones affected by this crisis, women bear an undue burden. The reality is that the care and education of young children is still widely viewed as women's work. Because women typically earn less than men, they are the ones who end up taking hiatuses when there are no affordable places for their children to be nurtured. All that perpetuates the cycle of lower wages and flatter career trajectories for women.

The issue affects women down the line. Restaurant workers struggle to find affordable childcare during their unpredictable working hours. Many scientists leave their fields after having their first child. College students with children drop out due to the double whammy of tuition and childcare. Aspiring political leaders may put off having children or wait until their children are older before even dreaming of running for office.

The prospects of women and children are inextricably linked, and both are marginalized by a society that fails to recognize their worth.

Ironically and not surprisingly, workers on whom we rely to care for and educate our youngest are some of the hardest hit, as described in a recent article by CALmatters' Ricardo Cano, "California preschool teachers are asking why 'cashiers at McDonalds' get better pay."

Early childhood educators are predominantly women, many of them immigrants and women of color. Many can't afford to stay in a profession that pays poverty wages, and more than half rely on public assistance, which leads to significant turnover. Few can afford licensed care for their own children.

Parents want to believe that the relatively affordable childcare provider they've managed to find is great, and she may well be. But the reality is that people suffering from extreme financial hardship cannot be expected to be at their best, even when they have the most important job in any parent's world: taking care of that parent's child.

Parents want to leave their children in places where they are greeted with smiles, where there are books to read, blocks to stack, and room to run, and where the child-teacher ratio is small enough that educators know the children, and understand what they need to grow and learn.

Multiple studies show that quality early childhood education helps close the achievement gap, decreases grade retention and placement in

special education, and improves health outcomes, among other benefits.

Mothers, and fathers, should be able to choose to stay home with their children, but the paucity of affordable, high quality care and education options should not be the deciding factor.

It doesn't have to be this way. Other countries with comparable overall wealth place a higher premium on young children and, on average, spend higher percentages of their GDPs on early childhood programs.

And there are a handful of positive outliers in this country. For example, a Center for American Progress study found that Washington DC's preschool program has increased mothers' participation in the labor force.

Gov. Newsom's budget for early childhood education and care is the start of what we desperately need in California. But we must build on this promise.

Women reaching their career potential and children getting the right start in school and in life reap huge, well-documented rewards for them and all of society.

So when we think about how we should be ranking our spending priorities, let's remember to count women, and remember that women and children count.

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