

# Free child care exists in America – if you cross paths with the right philanthropist <sup>[1]</sup>

In absence of federal funding, the ultra-rich are fronting the cost of child care initiatives

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## AVAILABILITY

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### Excerpts

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Inside the new nearly 51,000-square-foot facility, built to accommodate 150 students, children funneled into their bright, well-stocked classrooms. They were welcomed by teachers who had spent 12 months in paid professional development, unusual in a field where teacher training varies greatly. The young students, ranging in age from 6 weeks to 5 years, went about their day in well-stocked, spacious classrooms, playing and learning in small groups. The ample staff provided low student-to-teacher ratios and allowed for large amounts of individual attention.

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On paper, this child care program seems like it would cost parents tens of thousands of dollars a year, rivaling college tuition, as many early learning programs do. But here in picturesque Hershey, Derry Township's best known community, it's all free: the first brick and mortar of a new initiative cooked up by stewards of the Hershey billions.

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In a country with exorbitantly priced child care and a lack of available, high-quality options, initiatives like these provide a new opportunity to see the effect that free or heavily subsidized high-quality child care – something that is already the norm in many other wealthy, developed nations – could have in America.

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In the past few years, private foundations have taken on an outsized role in early learning programs and systems, funding initiatives that raise staff compensation, support existing or new programs and provide emergency funds. Nationwide, the amount of grants aimed at early childhood has increased significantly, from \$720.8 million between 2013 and 2015, to \$1 billion between 2021 and 2023, according to data compiled by the collaborative from the nonprofit Candid's philanthropy database. (Data is self-reported and categorized by funders.)

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Many of those funders are hopeful that their efforts will lead to federal investment, as well as "policy and systems change," she added.

At the same time, philanthropic involvement in education overall, including in early learning, raises questions around best practices. Are philanthropists adequately considering the needs of communities? How can and should a philanthropy involve community and existing efforts in the field? Are philanthropies listening to research and experts as they go forth and create? Should philanthropies reinvent the wheel or invest in what already exists?

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In addition to the trained educators, low ratios and research-based curricula, the Catherine Hershey Schools offer free transportation to its building, free diapers and wipes in classrooms, occupational and speech therapy, an in-house nurse, community partnerships, a parent resource center with individual parent coaches, external evaluators and an in-house researcher from the University of Pittsburgh who is tracking the school's outcomes to see if all of this is working.

I was mostly curious to see if free child care is as life-changing as many early childhood experts think it could be in America, especially for low-income families – Hershey sets income limits for families at 300 percent of the federal poverty level, or \$77,460 for a family of three.

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The school “provides the opportunity to build a life for our kids and keep them out of whatever the situation may be, streets, poverty, keep them clothed, keep them fed, keep the electric on, the heat on,” she said. Her daughters also have opportunities they wouldn’t have at home, Orellana added, such as getting to ride bikes, play games and make new friends.

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At Hershey, Anderson is most impressed by the experience and training of teachers, as well as by the fact that there are three teachers in a classroom capped at 17 children, far lower than the state mandated ratio.

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While philanthropically-funded programs can benefit those lucky enough to access them, without receiving public funds or partnering with others to expand, experts caution that the reach of these programs will be limited and exist only in areas with willing funders.

Some philanthropically funded early childhood programs, like Educare, have developed a model of launching centers using philanthropic dollars, then pulling in public funding later, a more sustainable model for allowing replication, said Rudisill from the early childhood funders collaborative.

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While Hershey’s funding is limited in scope to programs within the state of Pennsylvania, Alexander said replicating the model in its entirety in other parts of the country is not out of the question. That could bring free childcare and extensive resources to more children. All it will take are a few more willing billionaires.

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