

Plenty of models, scant funding for improved child care [US] ^[1]

Author: Fitzgerald, Joan

Source: Boston Globe

Format: Article

Publication Date: 9 Sep 2003

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

Working parents of all social classes are frustrated by the lack of reliable, high-quality child care and prekindergarten. There are plenty of promising models for providing it, including one in Massachusetts. The big problem is public money. But more substantial funding will flow only when broad constituencies are mobilized.

As structured, subsidy for child care is generally seen as a poor people's issue -- tending children so that welfare mothers can work or, more generously, Head Start money to give poor kids a better chance. A century ago, reformers promoted universal kindergarten as a way of integrating immigrant children into American society. They wisely promoted it for everyone and with well-trained teachers. In the same way, high quality child care is something that all families need today, because both parents typically work. The political logic of universal availability is the same.

In Massachusetts, the Education Reform Act of 1993 established goals for expanding child care and prekindergarten education. However, little has been done to carry it out. Proposed legislation would universalize high quality preschool education, professionalize the prekindergarten and child care labor force, and offer all-day kindergarten to all Massachusetts children. The program would phase in over 10 years and offer free childhood education four hours per day, five days per week on a year-round basis. The legislation has 111 House and Senate co-sponsors.

In Seattle, fittingly enough, child care and early childhood education may be paid for with a tax on espresso. The revenue would be dedicated to subsidizing and professionalizing early childhood education. A pilot project was started in 1999 by Governor Gary Locke using \$4 million saved from welfare reform. The project professionalizes early childhood education, creating career-ladders for teachers, mandating a base wage and raises for experience, responsibility, and education.

The program is modeled after the widely acclaimed Military Child Development Program used on military bases throughout the country. The four key elements of both programs are: pay increases tied to continuing education; training and curriculum specialists in all centers; sliding parent fees; and quarterly unannounced inspections. The approach stresses quality, availability, and affordability of child care.

In Washington, the entry-level job is a teacher's aide without a high school diploma. Workers receive pay raises as they gain experience and additional professional credentials. They also get raises if they get a one-year community certificate, a bachelor's or master's degree in early childhood education. One hundred twenty of the state's child care centers were selected by lottery to participate. Eligibility required licensed centers to have a minimum of 10 percent low-income children, agree to the state-mandated wage scale, provide a minimum of 12 days of paid leave, pay \$25 per month toward each worker's health benefits, help teachers apply for the state's "no frills" health plan, and form quality care committees.

The program has been a hit with parents of all income levels and child care workers. The average wage is \$8.94, not enough but well above the national average. And 85 percent of participating centers offer health care benefits, compared to 58 percent across the state.

The success of the program has created a vocal constituency for expansion. John Burbank, executive director of the Economic Opportunity Institute, which conceived the program, organized a campaign of center directors, teachers, and parents who secured funding for two more years.

The same campaign is now promoting the 10-cents-per-shot tax on espresso drinks to permanently fund the program in Seattle. The tax would raise \$7 million to \$10 million per year to increase wages of child care workers, provide subsidies for low-income families, and increase the number of child care slots. EOI is working to get its referendum on the November ballot.

As long as our national government is unresponsive to these needs, campaigns must mobilize grass-roots support in places like Boston and Seattle. There's overwhelming evidence that investment in early childhood education and child care is good for business and saves society money in the long run. The political challenge is to broaden the constituency for this common-sense idea, which commands broad support everywhere but in public budgets.

- reprinted from Boston Globe

Tags: demand ^[2]
availability ^[3]
pre-school ^[4]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/03/09/plenty-models-scant-funding-improved-child-care-us>
Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/03/09/plenty-models-scant-funding-improved-child-care-us> [2]
<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/demand> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/availability> [4]
<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/pre-school>