

U.S. falls behind on pre-school education [US] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

More than 75 percent of American children under 5 spend at least part of their day in child care. Throughout the United States, working parents struggle to pay for care that too often fails to give children the foundation they need to succeed as learners and as individuals. At the same time, child-care providers struggle to make ends meet in a profession where they earn less than parking lot attendants. Meanwhile, families in nearly every other industrialized nation reap the benefits of well-funded early care and education systems that help children make the best possible start.

As more states take action to build child-care systems that better meet the needs of parents and children, experts are looking to model nations and communities around the globe that have made the care and education of young children a top priority.

Nell Singer, an American living in France, took her time shopping for child care after adopting her infant daughter, Mayra. She could afford to. The bank where she worked offered her six months of paid parental leave.

Now that Singer is back on the job, she and Mayra walk each morning to the home of Isabelle, a child-care professional with special training in early development. Along with two other toddlers, Mayra spends her day learning songs, building with blocks, eating a home-cooked lunch, even putting on plays with neighborhood caregivers and their children. At 6 p.m., Mayra goes home. Singer pays \$18 for 10 hours of care.

On this side of the Atlantic, a Brattleboro foster parent had only two weeks to find suitable care for a 10-week-old baby placed in her home last fall -- with infant care so scarce, most providers don't even keep a waiting list, according to Windham Child Care Association referral specialist Jackie Gould.

Across town in West Brattleboro, a working couple needed afterschool care for their kindergartner. But because neither can take time off from their job to transport her when the school day ends at 1 p.m., she must shuffle between available providers from one day to another - at a time in her life when dependable routines are critical to her emotional security and learning.

The United States has been notoriously, some say embarrassingly, slow to adapt to the economic realities that have convinced nearly every other industrialized nation in the world to make investment in the care and education of young children a priority.

What are other countries seeing that we're not?

First, an increasingly strong body of evidence that demonstrates the critical importance of quality educational experiences in the first years of life, when the brain is most supple and ready to learn. Numerous studies have shown that, particularly among the poor, good quality preschool results in higher earnings, a lower high school dropout rate and less crime. The resulting benefits to society are tangible: \$4 saved in remedial education, public assistance, and prison costs for each \$1 spent on preschool, according to a landmark 1999 study by the Abecedarian Project.

"We now have 20 years worth of studies on the benefits of early intervention," said Dr. Jack P. Shonkoff, dean of the Heller School for Social Policy and Management and co-author of a major National Academy of Sciences report on early childhood development. "You can take this to the bank as far as science. The question, 'Does early intervention work?' is not a meaningful research question anymore. The answer is yes."

Yet despite the numbers, public investment in early education remains slim in comparison to higher education. Less than 5 percent of government education funding goes to benefit children under age 5.

That's confounding to many in the field, who point out that it's young families with infants and toddlers who are least likely to have the funds available to pay for care -- or have the financial means to support a stay-at-home parent. In Vermont, where over 80 percent of women with children under six are in the workforce, parents are struggling not just to pay for suitable child care, but to find it at all.

That's rarely the case in nations such as France, where ample government funding ensures that high-quality early care and education remains a universal right for all citizens, rich or poor.

"There's a real gap between the way the U.S. looks at children and the way western Europe, Japan, and so many other nations look at children," said Kim Friedman, Windham Child Care Association's advocacy coordinator and chairwoman of Vermont's Kids Are Priority One Organizing Committee. "After World War II, these nations asked themselves, 'What do we need to sustain ourselves long-term?' The resounding answer to that question was healthy, well-educated children. That has given birth to a mindset that continually asks, 'Is what we're doing good for the children?' and to national policies that explicitly support early care and education systems."

That emphasis on "systems" is what truly differentiates other countries from the United States, where care is largely unregulated, leaving parents to wade through choices that range from excellent to ineffectual to -- in an estimated 10-15 percent of programs nationwide -- downright detrimental.

"For an industrialized nation, the U.S. has unfortunately the poorest track record when it comes to the care and education of young children," says Jim Squires, Early Childhood Education Programs coordinator for the Vermont Department of Education. "We as a nation are not clear on our commitment to young children, because if we were, the funding issues would have been resolved."

Most critical, agree experts, is the wasting of generations of children who, according to Squires, "fall through the cracks" due to the lack of positive educational experiences and emotional support in their early years.

"You're paying now or you're paying later, and you pay much more later," says Windham Child Care Association Executive Director Elizabeth Christie. "Sometimes we spend money on intangible things, like joy, and there's so much joy in early childhood. It's helping children achieve their potential, and what a joy it is to help all children do that."

- reprinted from the Battleboro Reformer

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