

# How cities and counties are taking the lead on child care <sup>[1]</sup>

Absent federal action, local jurisdictions are increasingly looking for ways to help working parents.

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**Source:** Citylab

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 19 May 2015

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## EXCERPTS

America is waking up to child care as a major political issue. Back in January, President Obama discussed it at length for the first time in his State of the Union address. "In today's economy, when having both parents in the workforce is an economic necessity for many families, we need affordable, high-quality childcare more than ever," the president said, as parents around the country cheered (or shouted "Finally!" in exasperation).

Our child-care problem is really a cluster of them. First, there is the cost. On average, according to a 2014 report by Child Care Aware, parents of an infant in Massachusetts spend a shocking \$16,549 per year for child care—that's 53 percent more than public-college tuition. And Massachusetts is not an outlier: In his speech, Obama talked about a Minnesota family who spend more on child care than on their mortgage, which is not that uncommon.

The next problem is availability. As any parent knows, finding child care can be tough, and the younger your child is, the fewer your options. Quality is inconsistent and not great overall—more than 80 percent of day care centers nationwide are rated merely "fair," according to Child Care Aware. Plus, child-care workers in general are underpaid, earning a median wage of \$9.38 an hour.

So what's to be done? In his 2016 budget, Obama proposed a new tax cut of up to \$3,000 per child, per year, to offset child-care expenses. He would further allocate \$80 billion to child-care help for low-income families, and subsidize preschool for disadvantaged four-year-olds by raising the tobacco tax. Whether any of these measures make it through budget negotiations remains to be seen.

But meaningful action on child care and early education is lately emerging from a different quarter—cities and counties. This is a relatively new development in a field where decisions have long been made at the state and federal levels.

No one has staked more on the issue than New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio. The centerpiece of his campaign in 2013 was the promise of universal, free pre-kindergarten for all four-year-olds. After he took office, de Blasio had to fight Governor Andrew Cuomo to get his plan funded, but he won, and last fall, more than 50,000 children enrolled in pre-K classes across the city. De Blasio has also expanded after-school care for middle schoolers, with the goal of providing enough spaces for all of them.

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As New York's pre-kindergartners were settling into their new classrooms, voters in Seattle overwhelmingly passed Proposition 1B, a ballot initiative to fund a citywide preschool pilot for three- and four-year-olds through a property-tax levy of \$58 million. Fees will be subsidized on a sliding scale according to household income. Seattle based its pilot on model programs in Boston and Tulsa.

There is a raft of research showing that children who attend public preschool make gains in language, literacy, and math skills. Middle-class kids benefit, but poor kids benefit more. The return on investment is estimated at a range of \$2.50 to \$7 per dollar spent—although critics are skeptical about the scope of such benefits and how long they persist.

On May 5, one suburban county took a first step toward universal pre-K. Montgomery County, Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C., passed a law to expand child-care and early-education services. One of the bill's co-sponsors, Councilmember Hans Riemer, describes it as groundwork for eventual statewide pre-K in Maryland.

"No question, the state is going to have to pay for a lot of universal pre-K," Riemer says. "But there's a lot we can do before we can get to that point. That's kind of what [the] bill is about. Whether it's more funding for Head Start programs, extending [their] hours, or supporting home-based providers more." Contrast this with Loudoun County, Virginia, another D.C. suburb, where the school board won't even fund full-day kindergarten.

Montgomery County's legislation is somewhat unusual in that it touts child care before early education. The line between the two is blurry: There's not a magic age at which children start acquiring the skills they'll need for school (and indeed, child-care advocates argue that good child care is early education). Generally speaking, early education refers to preschool programs for children of three, four, and sometimes

five, while child care is broader, including care for infants and toddlers and after-school supervision for older children.

The difference, although to some degree semantic, matters politically. Many Americans still see child care as an optional expense for mothers who choose to work, even as single parents head more households and two-parent families find they need two incomes just to get by.

"The public does resonate more to an education message than to a child-care message," says Isabel Sawhill, co-director of the Center on Children and Families at the Brookings Institution. "I think that that goes back to some cultural hang-ups that we still have as a country about women working."

That may be one reason why universal pre-K is taking off in cities. Pre-K helps kids across the spectrum and makes it easier for their parents to find and afford care during the preschool years. Because it is formal education and not "just" care, it buffers cities against complaints that they are using it to subsidize working over stay-at-home mothers, or help parents at the expense of non-parents. And when pre-K isn't income-restricted, voters don't perceive it as welfare and are more willing to support it—a lesson learned from the mainstreaming of pre-K in the state of Georgia.

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The most comprehensive universal pre-K program in the country is in the District of Columbia, which has offered fully subsidized places to three- and four-year-olds since 2008. City officials hope the program will both narrow the student achievement gap and stem the flow of young families to nearby suburbs, like Montgomery County. A savings of roughly \$30,000 on two years of preschool, per child, is a pretty good incentive to stay put. As cities and their suburbs compete to lure (and keep) young professionals, public pre-K is sure to become part of the equation.

Subsidizing infant and toddler care more broadly is a bigger challenge. There are the politics, and the fact that caregivers are so decentralized makes it hard to apply standards. Caring for babies is expensive because they need a lot of attention; the caregiver-to-child ratio has to be high. Aspen, Colorado, uses a dedicated sales tax to partly fund child-care programs—including for the youngest children—and offers financial aid to low- and mid-income parents. This has kept caregivers in business and their prices "somewhat reasonable," says Shirley Ritter, the director of the city's KidsFirst department. However, such a tax is probably more palatable in a tourist economy like Aspen's.

Maybe Obama's proposed tax cut and child-care assistance will go nowhere. But a wider rollout of universal pre-K among cities and counties would make a huge difference to kids and parents—especially if it were bolstered by more generous parental leave. (Plus a higher minimum wage to help child-care workers ... hey, a mother can dream.) Such policies would broaden access to preschool and shorten the period when parents are devoting a huge chunk of their earnings to child care costs. Speaking from experience, three years of that would be a lot less painful than five.

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