

# Together from the start <sup>[1]</sup>

Expanding early childhood investments for middle-class and low-income families

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## AVAILABILITY

Full report online <sup>[2]</sup>

## Introduction

We are making significant progress in early childhood education but still have a long way to go. Over the past decade, new research in neuroscience on the benefits of high-quality early learning experiences has been met with increased state and federal investments in early childhood policies. Funding for state pre-K programs has doubled in the past ten years, and the federal government has also made new investments through the Preschool Development Grants and the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge. President Obama has also announced ambitious proposals for expanding early education and child care in his 2013, 2014, and 2015 State of the Union addresses—although these plans have yet to find substantial political traction in Congress. And as we approach the 2016 presidential election, early childhood policy is poised to be a central issue of debate.

But this increase in public spending—and the benefits that accrue from it—is not distributed among all American families. While there's growing political consensus that investing in high-quality early care and learning for low-income children is worthwhile, there is less agreement about the extent to which middle-class families should be included in public early childhood programs. High-quality early childhood programs are expensive because they invest in their workforce through wages, benefits, and training; include low adult-to-student ratios; and implement research-based curricula. President Obama's Preschool for All initiative would cost \$66 billion over ten years to expand states' pre-K coverage to families earning up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Those who oppose expanding programs beyond low-income families argue that we do not have enough evidence that pre-K and child care benefit middle-class families to warrant an expensive investment.

These arguments, however, are out of date. New research has revealed the ways that high-quality early care and education benefit both middle-class children and middle-class parents. Middle-class children attending high-quality early learning programs show improved cognitive outcomes and increased future earnings. Data on parent employment, preschool enrollment, and the cost of child care also make it clear that middle-class families too often lack access to the high-quality early childhood programs that parents and children need to thrive.

In this issue brief, we outline the research on the benefits of early care and learning for middle-class families—looking at the educational benefits for children, as well as the workforce benefits for parents. And we present policy solutions for states and the federal government to expand access to high-quality early care and learning for both middle- and low-income families, through universal pre-K and guaranteed child care subsidies.

**Region:** United States <sup>[3]</sup>

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