Where childcare is an economic engine [1]

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EXCERPTS

At the end of a long day of work at a small sports-marketing firm in Atlanta, a very pregnant Micki Velmer is driving to pick up her 3-year-old son, Burke, from childcare when her car overheats and breaks down. Velmer's husband, Jason, soon swings by to get her and then get both of them to the Frazer Center before it closes and starts charging late fees. Still, Velmer is uneasy.

In just a few short weeks, once their second child is born, the Velmers will be paying more than $2,800 a month—nearly $34,000 a year—for childcare for two children, more than the cost of the mortgage on their tidy ranch house in the suburbs. One year of care for their soon-to-be-born child, $1,450 a month, will be thousands of dollars more expensive than one year of in-state tuition at the University of Georgia. And they haven't had 18 years to save up for it. Now, Micki Velmer thinks, is not the time for expensive car repairs.

Because high-quality, affordable infant care is so hard to find—in Atlanta, in Georgia, in the United States—the Velmers enrolled their baby before the child was even born in order to secure a spot. When Burke was born, Micki Velmer had no paid family leave whatsoever. This time around, she'll get two weeks of paid parental leave, and she'll extend that to 12 weeks total with other paid and unpaid time off. Jason Velmer, who works in digital marketing for a French company, will have four weeks of paid parental leave. All the while, they'll be paying $4,350, plus a deposit for those three months, just to reserve their baby's spot.

"Childcare is tough," Micki Velmer said, walking heavily from the parking lot into the school. Even for those, like her and Jason, with good jobs and some savings. "I honestly don't know how some people do it." She does know that costs like childcare are a big reason that, after this second child is born, she and Jason are unlikely to have any more. "We'd always said we'd have two or three, but the financial piece is so scary."

And Georgia, compared to other states, does early care and learning pretty well.

The state pioneered one of the nation's first universal pre-kindergarten programs in the country. In the Care Index, a data and methodology collaboration between New America and Care.com, Georgia ranked in the second quartile, 18th out of the 50 states. It scored in the top 15 on quality and availability, but fell to 31st in terms of affordability. Though quality is difficult to measure, 12 percent of centers and family homes in the state are nationally accredited for quality. The Care Index found that the average cost of full-time infant care in a childcare center or family-home center outstrips the average cost of in-state college tuition and fees, not just in Georgia, but in a total of 33 states. For a family with a single worker earning minimum wage, the average cost of childcare in a center for a child under 5 takes up more than half their income. Nanny care in Georgia, the Index found, runs $27,729 a year, more than two and a half times the average rent in the state.

The Velmers are not the only family to struggle to find and afford quality infant care. Every morning, Monyatta Carter, who works as a medical coder for Emory Healthcare, rises around 5:30 a.m. to get her baby and toddler out the door of their home in Conyers, Georgia, drive them to their family-home childcare center 15 miles away, then get back in the car and head toward her office in Decatur, Georgia, by 9 am. She initially wanted her children near her at work, in case of an emergency, as her husband has an unpredictable schedule. But tuition at one nearby on-site child-development center would have cost more than her salary, even with her employee discount. She debated staying home. But her job provides not only steady income, but also the family's health insurance. "I couldn't afford to work," she said. "And I couldn't afford not to work."

What Georgia does well, however, is its early and pioneering embrace of early-childhood education. Georgia was among the first states, along with Massachusetts and Washington, to create a stand-alone Department of Early Care and Learning. "We don't talk about daycare here," one state official said. "We talk about early learning."

Both Democratic and Republican governors have supported the expansion of the universal pre-kindergarten program. The state has invested more than $6 billion in state lottery funds over 25 years to make high quality pre-K available to 1.4 million children, said Amy Jacobs, the commissioner of the Department of Early Care and Learning. Though demand still outstrips a supply—between 5,000 and 8,000 children sit on the waiting list every year—the system currently serves nearly 60 percent of the state's

Researchers have found that children from all backgrounds—especially those who don't speak English at home—are making gains across all domains, and those gains are continuing into kindergarten and beyond. Childcare is a $4.7-billion-a-year industry in Georgia, putting it on par with the pharmaceutical and hotel/motel sectors. Early education is responsible for creating 85,000 jobs and for enabling more than a half million parents to work and pay taxes on $24 billion in taxable income. "Legislators and business leaders now see that the childcare industry is an important economic driver in the state," Jacobs said. "I don't think that early learning is a partisan issue. It's a bipartisan issue. I think how you pay for it is a partisan issue. And we're working on that here in Georgia."

That gets at the heart of the current struggle in Georgia: What to do about the babies.

Infant care is expensive because of the low teacher-to-child ratio, so it's often the first thing providers cut when times get tough. This in turn reduces the number of options for families, and low pay leads to high teacher turnover and lower levels of quality. In other advanced economies, infant care is handled with paid family leave. But in the United States, only 13 percent of the civilian workforce has paid family leave, and, since the 1990s, the majority of children have been in some form of childcare arrangement from the time they're six weeks old. Nearly one in four mothers, one investigation of a Department of Labor survey found, return to work within two weeks.

Yet in Georgia, as in the rest of the country, infant care is hard to find, often wildly expensive, and, one recent state study found, pretty bad. Nearly 70 percent of all licensed infant and toddler classrooms in Georgia were rated as low quality, with children in environments "inadequate for their health and safety" that "do not promote their cognitive and social-emotional development."

The state is working to improve by creating a Quality-Rated Improvement System using federal grants and privately-raised funds. But infant care is a tough sell. Many lawmakers see early care and learning as the private responsibility of families, advocates said, not a public good to invest in. "And honestly, many legislators come from a different era in which Mama stayed home with their babies, so they think that is where they belong," said Carolyn Salvador, the executive director of the Georgia childcare Association. "You've got to overcome old ideas that this is not early education, but just glorified babysitting."

But brain research shows how crucial quality care is from earliest moments. A child is born with about 100 billion neurons, about as many stars as in the Milky Way, and about all the neurons the brain will ever have. By age 3, the brain has produced twice as many connections between these neurons, at a faster rate, than at any other time in life, making between 700 and 1,000 new neural connections every second. This rapid growth lays the foundation not only for communication, thought, and social skills like the ability to "read" other people, but also builds the architecture for all future learning and what researchers call the reading brain.

So much of academic—and, later, income—inequality starts right at the beginning of life: One study found that, by age 3, children from impoverished backgrounds have been exposed to 13 million words, while those from more affluent backgrounds 45 million words—a 30 million-word gap that persisted in language skills when the children studied were 9 and 10 years old.

"Essentially, by age 5, you've gone a long way toward deciding a child's future," said Comer Yates, the executive director of the Atlanta Speech School, which offers free online training to parents, caregivers, and teachers around the world on the science behind why exposing children to language early is so critical, and how to do it. "The great news is, we know what the science says. The tragedy is, we just simply aren't applying it."

At Sheltering Arms Model Teaching Center in Atlanta, teachers in the infant classroom have been trained through another state-wide initiative called "Better Brains for Babies." Educators learn the science of what's called "serve and return" interaction that promotes the engagement of rapidly growing neurons. Even before a child can say his or her first words, the teachers talk in a warm, bright, sing-song, called "parentese," and wait for a child to respond, creating not only a language-rich environment, but also strong bonds of attachment so children feel safe to explore, discover, and take risks. Teachers at Sheltering Arms travel with the children, teaching them every year until they enter pre-k.

But providing that kind of care is expensive. Economists like Stanford University's Myra Strober argue that it will take not just parents, but also business and government support. According to one study, nationally, parents shoulder about 60 percent of the cost of early care and learning; federal, state, and local governments 39 percent; and businesses and philanthropic organizations just 1 percent.

"The economics for childcare are the same as for K-12 education: There is no education that isn't subsidized," Strober said. "Public education is fully subsidized by the government, and private education is subsidized by private gifts from alumni and the tax system. But the way childcare is set up now, the market just doesn't work. Parent tuition alone simply cannot cover the cost of services."

Micki Velmer has her concerns about the quality of care at the Frazer Center. She loves the diverse and inclusive special-needs community; how the center is tucked into the woods with walking paths and gardens; and that it's only one mile from their house. But, every year, despite the high price tag, the teacher turnover has also been high. Not one of Burke's teachers has made it through an entire school year, which she worries has disrupted the quality of his care. But Velmer hangs on because, if Burke stays, he'll be guaranteed a spot in the state's free universal pre-k system. Then she'll only need to pay about $75 a week for after school care. If they send him somewhere else, the Velmers can enter the lottery and take a chance that he'll get one of the universal pre-K slots at a nearby public school or another private or nonprofit center. But that's no guarantee. The competition in their Druid Hills neighborhood for the limited pre-K slots is fierce. "It just seems like a big gamble," she says.

Micki Velmer slowly walks into Burke's classroom, where the children sit in a circle on a colorful carpet listening to one of the new teachers read a story, while Jason Velmer stays in the car and calls a mechanic and tow truck. The little boy's eyes light up when he sees his mother, and he rushes to crush himself against her huge belly.

"Hey Bud," she says softly, brushing the soft blonde hair from his forehead. "Have a good day?"

“Yeah,” Burke says, not letting go.

“You ready to go home?”

The boy nods. They walk toward the car, hand in hand.

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