A New “Early Years” Model for Solving Florida’s Silent Crisis

"Investments in quality services and programs for children during the early years produce higher rates of return to government, private sector investors and philanthropists, and must be given special attention."

High quality environments in the early years set the foundation for a child’s lifelong success. Whether a child will have a smooth or rocky pathway into adulthood is largely determined by whether critical needs are met in the earliest years. More than just education, children have critical health, nutritional, safety, social and emotional needs that impact a child’s readiness to learn and fully develop.

Although Florida is dedicated to building a 21st century workforce, its systems and supports for young children and their families have not evolved with the times - or the latest early years research.

Rather than investing in high quality supports for children’s early years, Florida spends money disproportionately in K-12 remediation, much of which could be prevented. Despite the good efforts of many, this paradox is leading to a silent crisis. Since the impacts are often not immediately visible or readily measurable, children’s lost potential, developmental delays or even failure are not realized until years into the future, often in third grade, but sometimes not until much later.

Voices for Florida is an innovator and recommends that quality child-serving programs be co-located and integrated – an emerging solution nationally that eliminates many barriers and ensures that children from all communities and socio-economic backgrounds receive the emotional, cognitive, physical and social support needed for life-long success.

Investments in Children’s Early Years Yield Long-lasting Returns

Investments in quality services and programs for children during the early years produce higher rates of return to government, private sector investors and philanthropists, and must be given special attention.

When the developmental needs of children are met, they become ready for school; are socially and emotionally healthy, confident and friendly; have positive peer relationships; tackle and persist with challenging tasks; have good language skills and communicate well; and develop critical thinking and problem solving abilities. They also are less likely to repeat a grade, be placed in special education, drop out of school or become involved with the juvenile justice system.

The Crisis is Growing

During the past 30 years, increasing numbers of families throughout the U.S. have come to depend on public assistance in meeting the developmental needs of their children. In Florida, this number is 1,349,000 or 33 percent. In 1975, more than five of every 10 children had a stay-at-home parent. Today, fewer than one in three children have a full-time, stay-at-home parent, with only seven percent of Florida’s children having at least one unemployed parent.

America has been under-investing in these critical early years for several decades and it puts an unreasonable burden on parents and families. For example, in 2015, the average annual cost of child care across America was estimated to be $18,000 - greater than the yearly costs of sending a child to a public college.

It is estimated that parents and families pay about 60 percent of these child care costs. For many parents, child care costs are greater than their annual housing, transportation or utilities expense. This financial obligation is out of reach for the majority of families, leaving their children in questionable or risky circumstances. Regardless, the opportunity to meet their children’s developmental needs is not met.

While the costs of child care are rising, ironically, they do not represent the adequate investment required for providing quality care, nor have they translated into higher salaries for professionals and workers in the child care industry. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average national salary of an Early Childhood Specialist with a college degree is $35,000, while a non-degreed child care employee is paid an average median wage of $9.38 per hour. That is comparable to the earnings of food preparation workers - $9.28 per hour - and retail sales employees - $10.29 per hour.

Shifting Public Policies to a “Child-centered” Approach

Effective public policies to address the comprehensive developmental needs of a child’s early years can have large private and public payoffs, and capitalize on the high rate of return for public investments. Experts agree that public policies should not only address the developmental needs of a child, but also:

- reduce child care related barriers to parental employment, such as child care centers only operating during traditional office hours on week days, when work shifts sometimes are outside those hours;
- ensure that non-parental child care incorporate professional standards, training and wages to achieve quality outcomes;
- leverage resources to provide affordable, easily accessible, high-quality developmentally appropriate care and education;
- embrace the benefits of performance management models and quality improvement principles to build effective and measurable processes; and
- focus on policies that recognize the benefits of first key data points – known as leading indicators – that provide critical information for supporting actions needed to achieve desired outcomes and avoid unwanted results.

Although Florida is dedicated to building a 21st century workforce, its systems and supports for young children and their families have not evolved with the times - or the latest early years research.
An emerging economic and market-based approach is to co-locate and integrate quality programs – thus eliminating many barriers and ensuring that children from all communities and socio-economic backgrounds have emotional, cognitive, physical and social supports for life-long success.

This child-centered approach to delivering key services (e.g., medical, dental, behavioral, early care and learning, food security and nutrition) in a “one stop shop” setting assists time-stretched working parents. Co-location and integration of services improve the decision-making process for care and establish an environment for continuity and developmentally appropriate services. By co-locating “backroom” administrative functions typically associated with the traditional silo-structured service delivery model, fiscal resources are better leveraged and cost-savings are redirected to fund direct services and programs.\(^9\)

While transitioning from a traditional silo-structured setting to a child-centered approach might sound daunting, it would not be the first time that this shift has been made. The United States successfully accomplished this feat during World War II when an estimated 57 percent of women were called to the workforce to replace the men who had left to fight in the war. This paradigm shift in the workforce created an overwhelming demand for non-parental child care. Congress acted immediately and created The Lanham Act in 1941. This Act, in addition to funding community services specifically for the war effort, also funded child care. The care centers, as they were called, were funded with federal dollars along with matched funding from state and local governments, community leaders and philanthropists.\(^9\)

A New Model To Address Florida’s Silent Crisis

The new model should apply a fully integrated, child-centered approach to improve access, program quality and service delivery using economically driven investments of public, private and philanthropic dollars that achieve positive outcomes for children. The model’s integrated, end-to-end system should also use the continual improvement principles of Lean Six Sigma to promote comprehensive, evidenced-based practices and developmentally appropriate services. This approach will create access to quality care and education for children, support families and improve quality of life and economic opportunities in their communities. Expected outcomes include:

- increased kindergarten readiness, reduced K-12 remediation rates;
- reduced behavioral concerns in school and at home;
- reduced juvenile justice involvement in later years;
- greater critical thinking and problem-solving skills that last a life-time;
- improved quality of life for parents and families;
- lower taxpayer burden;
- leveraging administrative costs and redirecting the savings to pay for services and programs;
- better flow of information among academic leaders, professionals, experts, service providers and other key stakeholders;
- improved opportunities for professional development and applied learning; and
- integrated, end-to-end system that incorporates continual improvement principles of Lean Six Sigma.

Conclusion

Investment, by definition, means to forgo “consumption” spending today to produce a payoff in the future.\(^1\) A new model is needed to address Florida’s silent child development crisis by investing in innovative, high quality, outcomes-based solutions.

Recognizing the enormous impact that investing in children’s early years could have and establishing public policies to address these unique needs are how policymakers make wise investments for taxpayers. These policy decisions ensure children experience the best possible environment to reach their potential and have an opportunity to live the American Dream.
Footnotes

1 The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; US Department of Health and Human Services
2 The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count Data Center
3 The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development: *Doing Better for Families*
4 The NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development
5 Partnership for America’s Economic Success, Investing in Children
6 The Center for Law and Social Policy
7 Child Care Aware of America
8 The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development: *Doing Better for Families*
9 The Future of Children, Princeton-Brookings
10 Co-Location and Integration, McLean County
11 *The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children*—James J. Heckman and Dimitriy V. Masterov