



The Military Gets It; So Why Not PA?

High-quality early care and education supports children and families today and improves national security tomorrow

Acknowledgements

Council for a Strong America is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites five organizations comprised of law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, business executives, pastors, and prominent coaches and athletes who promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be citizen-ready.

Mission: Readiness

Retired admirals and generals strengthening national security by ensuring kids stay in school, stay fit, and stay out of trouble.

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Summary

A generation ago, the Department of Defense developed and invested in an exemplary early care and education system for our country's military families. At that time, military leaders noted the changing composition of the force to include more women and families. As such, this investment in high-quality early care and education was viewed as a critical workforce support so that those parents could most effectively do their jobs of protecting the nation.

In addition to supporting the workforce, early care and education helps ensure that our next generation is "citizen-ready"—healthy, well-educated and prepared for productive lives. Our national security depends on qualified young adults who are ready, willing, and able to serve in the U.S. military. However, educational deficits, health issues, and behavior problems

currently prevent 71 percent of Pennsylvania youth from qualifying for service. These concerns are echoed by Pennsylvania business leaders who have difficulty hiring workers with adequate skills, training or education.

There is scientific consensus that brain development from birth to age five sets the stage for children's future success. High-quality early education environments like child care and pre-k provide a foundation for academic achievement, social competence, improved health, and greater productivity.

Progress has been made in Pennsylvania over the past decade to increase investments in publicly funded high-quality school day, school year pre-k programs.¹ Unfortunately this progress has not kept pace with the need as more than 106,000 eligible 3- and 4-year-olds still lack access to these pre-k programs. Moreover, 68 percent of children under the age of six in

Pennsylvania (more than 560,000 kids) have parents or a single parent who works outside the home, and most of these children are not in high-quality early care and education environments.

Pennsylvania policymakers should look to the military's example by further investing in the state's early care and education programs to better support working families and the citizen-readiness of our next generation.

Early brain development has lifelong impacts

The birth-to-age-five time frame is the most dramatic period of brain development.² During these years, more than one million new neural connections form every second.³ This early foundation informs children's cognition, health, and behavior throughout life.

Several factors can impair healthy brain development in early childhood. Without a stable environment and responsive

caregivers, infants can experience toxic stress—a prolonged activation of the stress response system (known as “fight or flight”) that can lead to long-term deficits.⁴ Visual, hearing, and sensory-motor problems can also impair brain development when left unaddressed.⁵

As a result of such negative experiences, differences in cognitive abilities emerge as early as nine months of age.⁶ By age three, children of different backgrounds have varying commands of language. A landmark study on this topic found that three-year-old children with parents on welfare had vocabularies that were half that of children with professional parents (525 vs. 1,116 words).⁷

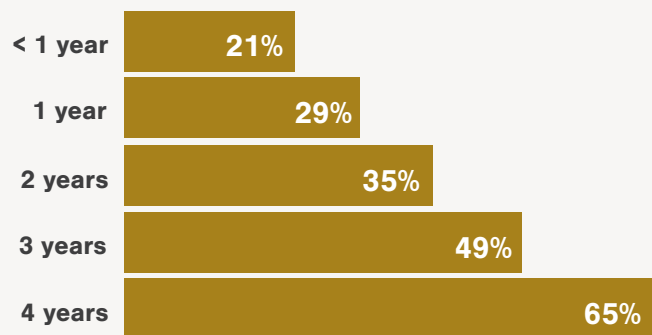
Many Pennsylvania youth are not “citizen-ready”

According to Department of Defense data, 71 percent of young Americans between the ages of 17 and 24, and 71 percent of young Pennsylvanians, do not qualify for military service.⁸ Obesity is one of the leading reasons, barring nearly one-third of young Americans from service. Educational shortcomings, including lack of a high school diploma or failure on the military's entrance exam, disqualify another third.⁹ Finally, 10 percent of young adults have a criminal record and 30 percent have a drug abuse record that prevent them from qualifying.¹⁰

Pennsylvania employers are also experiencing workforce gaps that affect their bottom line. According to the Pennsylvania Chamber of Business and Industry, “More than half of Pennsylvania's employers (52 percent) reported having difficulty hiring people with adequate skills, training or education. This is especially true of the technical and skilled trade jobs.”¹¹

Young children in child care by a non-relative

Percent of young children, ages birth to 4, who are in child care by a non-relative



Source: Child Trends DataBank, 2016

High-quality early care and education can help improve “citizen-readiness”

1. Education

A longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in higher-quality child care were better prepared for school at age four compared to children in lower-quality child care. At age 15, they were still performing slightly above their peers.¹² A recent study found that high-quality, full-day child care had a positive impact on children’s language development at age two.¹³

When combined with high-quality preschool, child care can have an even greater impact on academic achievement. For example, a study of North Carolina’s Smart Start (child care) and More at Four (preschool) programs found that children in counties that spent more per child were two months ahead in reading and 1.5 months ahead in math by fifth grade when compared with children in counties that spent less.¹⁴ In Pennsylvania, nearly 50% of our high-quality pre-k programs are in child care centers.¹⁵

2. Obesity

Obesity risk is shaped in the early years of life. Children who are overweight or obese in early childhood (which is the case for 23 percent of 2- to 5-year-old children in the U.S.)¹⁶ are four times as likely to become overweight or obese adults.¹⁷

Early care and education that emphasizes healthy eating and physical activity can help reduce children’s risk of obesity. For example, a study of the Abecedarian program found that girls who participated were less likely to

become obese as adults and boys had fewer risk factors for heart disease, stroke and diabetes.¹⁸ Meanwhile, two randomized studies of nutrition programs in Head Start centers found that participating children had a lower risk of obesity two years later.¹⁹

3. Behavior

The aforementioned longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in higher-quality child care had significantly lower levels of behavior problems at age 15 compared to children in lower-quality child care.²⁰



Children in higher quality child care were better prepared for school at age four compared to children in lower-quality child care



Too many of Pennsylvania's young children are not in **HIGH-QUALITY** early care and education

Despite the known benefits of high-quality early care and education, especially for at-risk children, many families have trouble finding care. And, even when care is available, it is often low quality. There are three main problems in Pennsylvania and across the U.S.:

- **Access:** Pennsylvania's publicly funded high quality, school day, school year pre-k programs serve only 39 percent of eligible children. This equates to more than 106,000 eligible 3- and 4-year-olds each year without access to programs like Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts and Pennsylvania Head Start Supplemental Assistance Programs.²¹ Nationwide, nearly one-third of parents (32 percent) report having difficulty finding child care.²²
- **Cost:** The average annual cost of center-based child care for infants in

Pennsylvania (\$12,129) is comparable to the average cost of in-state college tuition (\$14,436).²³ This high cost puts child care out of reach for many families, particularly low-income families.

- **Quality:** Only 39 percent of all child care in Pennsylvania currently meets high-quality standards.²⁴ This is troubling when you consider that 68 percent of children under the age of six in Pennsylvania—more than 560,000 children—have all available parents in the workforce.²⁵ Many of these children are in child care by non-relatives.²⁶ Further, in Pennsylvania, 65 percent or almost 40,000 children enrolled in state-subsidized child care attend programs that have not met high-quality standards.²⁷

Scaling up high-quality early care and education - Lessons learned from the Military

The Military Child Care System (MCCS), part of the Military Child Development Program, has been cited by experts as a model for the nation, but that was not always the case.²⁸

In the 1980's, military child care was called a "disaster" by one military official. The system was marred with high waiting lists, unsuitable facilities, inadequate standards and inspections, and low pay and qualifications for staff. The concern was that with the changing face of the military workforce to include more personnel with families and more women, the problems associated with a low-quality early care and education system would quickly become a workforce recruitment and retention issue for the military. In 1989, Congress passed the Military Child Care Act that served as the catalyst for a slate of much needed reforms that led to the current high-quality system.²⁹



The Department of Defense's overhaul effort prioritized quality and affordability³⁰

Quality: The military now requires its providers to meet state health and safety licensure as well as national accreditation. Nearly all (95 percent) of military child development centers are accredited, compared to about 10 percent of civilian centers. If a provider is deficient in meeting these standards, MCCS will work with them to ensure adequate compliance. Providers are subject to four unannounced inspections per year, and ongoing noncompliance can result in closure and dismissal of staff.³¹

The education and training of child care instructors is another key indicator of quality. As such, the MCCS mandates a training program (including on-the-job training) and credentials as a condition for employment. This training is provided at no cost to the employee and it is linked to a career ladder that leads to increased compensation for each step. Additionally, the military system offers higher wages than civilian counterparts and benefits, which has dramatically reduced staff turnover.³²

Affordability: High-quality early care and education is expensive, and most military families are unable to afford these costs in full. All active-duty military families have access to the system and receive financial subsidy to offset the cost. Fees for on-base programs are on a sliding scale, determined by family income. On average, these subsidies cover 64 percent of the cost. Families using programs in civilian communities receive a stipend to cover a portion of their costs as well.³³

Today, across the country and around the world, 200,000 military children are growing and learning in these early care and education programs.³⁴ They are comprehensive and high-quality, focused on children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development.

The military offers this service in diverse early care and education settings:

44%

Child development centers on military installations

14%

Family child care homes in government housing

21%

Centers and family child care homes in civilian settings

21%

Child care or preschool offered in K-12 schools³⁵

High-quality early care and education is seen as a mission critical family support for military families. As such, the Department of Defense has prioritized and invested significant resources to ensure access through subsidized rates, quality teachers, enforcement of robust standards and help to meet those standards.

Pennsylvania policymakers must continue to invest in high-quality early learning

Given the long-term benefits of high-quality early care and education for children and the critical role it plays in supporting working families, Pennsylvania's policymakers should continue to invest in all high-quality early learning environments by prioritizing the following in the final 2018-19 state budget:

1. \$40 million in new state funding to serve an additional 4,400 at-risk children with high-quality school-day, school-year pre-k programs such as Head Start and the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts Programs.
2. \$10 million in new state funding to reduce Pennsylvania's waiting list for subsidized child care by 1,600 children.
3. \$10 million in new state funding to boost access to high-quality child care through the Keystone Stars quality rating system.
4. \$3 million in new state funding to establish an infant/toddler child care pilot program to improve quality.

Conclusion

Support for high-quality early care and education supports children and families today and is an investment in our future national security.

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Notes

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