



Early Childhood Education in Alaska

2022 Policy Fact Sheet

Early Childhood Education and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Alaska's early childhood education system is an essential part of the economy, preparing children for school and enabling families to work, all while employing a significant workforce. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on this sector. While the majority of Alaska's early childhood education programs are open, they are struggling financially amidst fluctuating enrollments and rising operational costs to keep children safe and healthy. More than 50% of programs are concerned about having to close in the future.

thread's vision is that Alaska's families have access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education for their children. To realize that vision, the system must first be stabilized to ensure it will be there for families on the other side of the pandemic. Then the system must be built back better. If realized, **thread's** vision means the early childhood education system supports children's growth, development, and educational advancement, and creates positive impact for families and communities. It also means that early childhood educators are valued and compensated accordingly.

The Heckman Equation

By Nobel Prize-winning University of Chicago Economics Professor James Heckman

+ **INVEST**
Invest in educational and developmental resources for disadvantaged families to provide equal access to successful early human development.

+ **DEVELOP**
Nurture early development of cognitive and social skills in children from birth to age five.

+ **SUSTAIN**
Sustain early development with effective education through to adulthood.

= **GAIN**
Gain a more capable, productive and valuable workforce that pays dividends to America for generations to come.



A Child's Early Brain Development

Decades of research tells us that the early years of life (ages 0-3) are a period of exponential brain development, characterized by great opportunity and vulnerability, dependent on the relationships and environments in which the child is growing.¹ Simply put, early experiences determine whether a child's brain wiring will provide a strong or weak foundation for all future learning and behavior.



High-Quality Early Childhood Education Settings Matter

While parents are a child's first teacher, the reality is many working families with young children depend on early childhood education programs (licensed child care, Pre-K, Head Start, tribal and military care) in order to go to work or school. On average, the children of working mothers spend about 36 hours a week in early childhood education programs. Given the amount of time children spend in programs, the quality of the setting has a direct impact on child development and learning.

Research shows a connection between high-quality early childhood education settings and school success. High-quality settings:

- Help shape a child's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development.
- Improve a child's school readiness and ultimate school performance, which leads to fewer grade retentions, fewer referrals to special education, fewer high school drop outs, fewer incarcerations, and increases economic growth for communities.

[Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education]



Families Face Challenges with Access to Affordable, High-Quality Settings

For many families, it's hard to find high-quality early childhood education programs for their children. More families are in need of these services than is available, especially for infant and toddler care. **thread**, Alaska's statewide child care resource and referral network, works with thousands of families every year to help them find high-quality early childhood education programs in their communities.

In Alaska, there are promising solutions to ensure children in early childhood education programs experience high-quality in the future. Learn & Grow, Alaska's Quality Improvement and Recognition System (QRIS), together with Alaska's System for Early Education Development (SEED), create a system designed to offer all early childhood education programs an opportunity for continuous quality improvement, and educators a system for professional development.

Families also have difficulty affording care. Alaska is one of 15 states where both the annual cost of center-

More than 88,000 children are in need of care, including children in households where adults are not able to be fully employed due to lack of access to early childhood education.



Average annual cost of center-based care in Alaska is more than college tuition:

Infant: \$11,832

Pre-school: \$9,847

based infant care and center-based preschool care exceeds the annual cost of tuition and fees at four-year state public colleges. In fact, Alaska is one of many states where the annual cost in both centers and family child care homes for children under age 5 exceeds the annual cost of college tuition!²

Affording early childhood education programs is particularly a challenge for those with more than one child and for those with low incomes.

Some financial assistance is available, but not enough. About 13,000 families with children under age 6 live in low-income working families.³ Yet, on average, about 3,300 children each month receive a subsidy for their families to help make the cost of child care more affordable.⁴



A Strong Economy Depends on a Skilled Workforce

The forces of globalization and technology continue to redefine the knowledge economy: tomorrow's workers must rely more on brain than on brawn. Technological improvements have led to escalating skill requirements, and globalization has contributed to the loss of many labor-intensive and digitally transferable jobs in the United States.⁵

What is clear is that individuals need to achieve education beyond a high school degree and need to develop advanced technical skills. The most formative years of brain development come well before a child starts kindergarten. Children in high-quality early childhood education settings get the strong start they need to thrive in school and beyond. It sets the foundation for Alaska's future workforce.

A robust early childhood education system also provides a stable workforce for Alaska today. Access to early childhood education programs allows 87% of Alaska's adults to be employed.⁶



The Connection Between High-Quality Early Childhood Education, Including Pre-K, and School Success

High quality early childhood education programs, including Pre-K, helps children start school ready to succeed.

It is far more expensive to intervene during the K-12 years to help keep a child on track than it is to make an early investment to start children on track. In Alaska, about 7,000 children repeat a grade between kindergarten and high school. About 21 percent of children do not graduate on time (or drop out).

The 2019 National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) average reading scores for Alaska’s 4th grade children were lower than the average scores of 4th graders in 50 other states.⁷

- 4th graders eligible for free and reduced priced lunch had an average score that was 32 points lower than their peers.
- 66 percent of Alaska Native 4th grade students read below grade level.

How children fare on 4th grade reading tests is directly related to their readiness to start school when they first entered.

The research shows that we can do better. We can help children enter school ready to succeed by offering full-day high-quality Pre-K.

thread supports expanding early childhood education programs to give working families more access to affordable, high-quality programs. **thread** recommends Pre-K be provided and available in a mixed delivery model to allow for full-day and full-year program options that families want and need.



Mixed Delivery Systems for Pre-K Work Best for Families

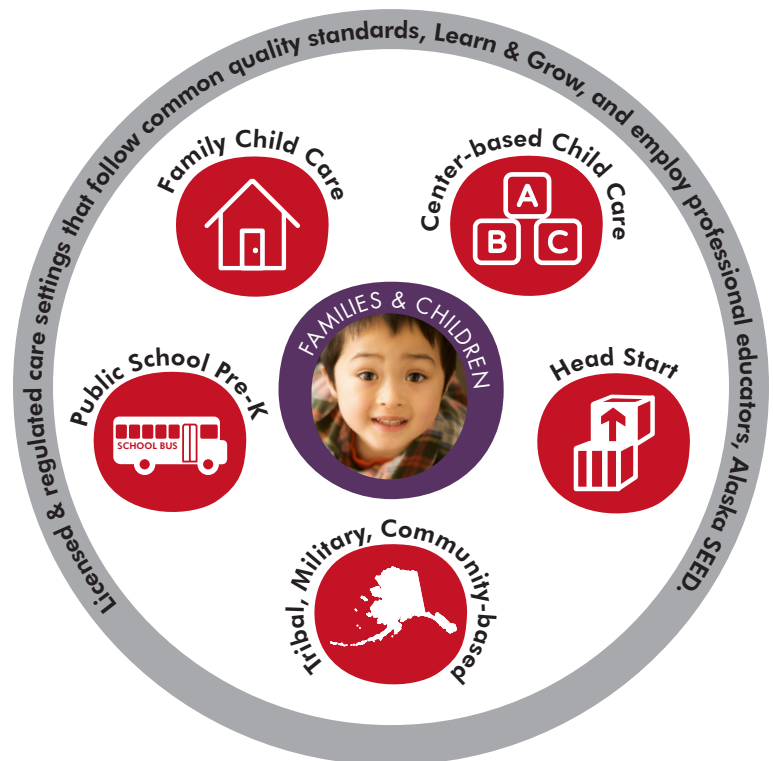
A mixed delivery system means Pre-K programs serving three- and four-year olds are offered in diverse settings, such as public schools, licensed family and center-based child care programs, Head Start, or other regulated/licensed community-based programs, in order to increase parent choice and improve the quality of care. This approach is also a sound example of public-private partnership to deliver high-quality early childhood education to more families.

Many states offer Pre-K in mixed delivery systems. For example, North Carolina and New Mexico offer more than half their Pre-K classrooms through child care centers. This works in communities because families

need full “working day” care (not full “school day” care), and the centers are set up to accommodate the work day schedule. Additionally, when 4 year-olds are already engaged in a child care program they benefit from the continuity of care, and being in a familiar setting.

By offering Pre-K in a mixed delivery system, both families and children benefit. Families have the support and convenience they need during the work day, while children experience a higher-quality classroom and environment.

Pre-K Mixed Delivery System



The Research on “Return on Investment”

The Chicago Child Parent Centers (CPCs) were similar to current state Pre-K programs in design and cost. The Chicago Longitudinal Study reported a \$7.14 to \$1 benefit-cost ratio.⁸

The High/Scope Perry Preschool Program that operated in the Ypsilanti, Michigan school district has been estimated to have a benefit-cost ratio of \$16 to \$1 (40 years after children attended).⁹

One year of full day Pre-K at age 4 can raise future earnings by 10 percent. This increases the present value of future earnings for former child participants by about \$50,000, at a cost of about \$10,000, for a benefit of 5 to 1.¹⁰

Studies show that a high school graduate earns \$569,000 more over a lifetime than a student who does not complete high school.⁶



A meta-analysis from leading researchers describes the rate of return in two ways:¹¹

- Benefits may come from cost savings, such as reduced spending for special education and grade retention, as well as lower involvement in the child protection, welfare, and criminal justice systems; and second,
- Benefits may flow from greater economic productivity, higher earnings as adults.

The evidence is clear: high quality Pre-K programs are among the most cost-effective interventions with a long-term pay-off. It's more important than ever to invest in early childhood education.



Learn More

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Visit **thread's** website at www.threadalaska.org.

thread's Mission — To advance the quality of early education and child development by empowering parents, educating child care professionals, and collaborating with our communities.

REFERENCES

¹ ZERO TO THREE. <https://zerotothree.org>

² Child Care Aware of America, 2020 Alaska State Fact Sheet. <https://www.childcareaware.org/ccdc/state/ak/>

³ Annie Casey Kids Count Data Center, Low Income Working Families, Alaska. <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/10381-low-income-working-families-with-children?loc=3&loct=2#detailed/2/3/false/1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867,133/any/20052,20053>

⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care, FY2019 Preliminary CCDF Data. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/data/fy-2019-preliminary-data-table-1>

⁵ Committee for Economic Development. "The Economic Promise of Investing in High-Quality Preschool: Using Early Education to Improve Economic Growth and the Fiscal Sustainability of States and the Nation." (2006). <http://bit.ly/1vl4gbz>

⁶ Early Care & Learning In Alaska 2020 Economic Impact Report

⁷ National Assessment for Educational Progress (2019). 4th Grade Test Score Results for Alaska. <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/st#2019/pdf/2020014AK4.pdf>

⁸ The Chicago Longitudinal Study, Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, (2002). <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/dps/pdfs/dp124502.pdf>, <http://bit.ly/1Be11pV>

⁹ Getting the Facts Right on Pre-K and the President's Pre-K Proposal, NIEER (2013). <http://bit.ly/1Be11pV>

¹⁰ From Preschool to Prosperity, Tim Bartik. (2014). <http://investinginkids.net/>

¹¹ Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education. (2013). Society for Research in Child Development and Foundation for Child Development. <http://bit.ly/1pfzv3B>



2022 Policy Recommendations

- *Create a Child Care Trust Fund to invest in child care for the future.*
- *Stabilize Alaska's early childhood education system during the pandemic. (See **thread's** Recommendations for Stabilizing Child Care during COVID-19.)*
- *Pass HB149, Child Care Provider Collective Bargaining.*
- *Help families access and afford high-quality early childhood education programs in order to return to the workplace.*
- *Invest in a publicly/privately funded mixed delivery system for Pre-K.*
- *Increase family choice for high-quality early childhood education by investing in Learn & Grow, Alaska's Quality Recognition & Improvement System (QRIS), and Alaska System for the Early Education Development (SEED).*
- *Recognize Learn & Grow, Alaska's Quality Recognition and Improvement System (QRIS), as the quality and standards framework for all early care and education programs in Alaska.*