

## **Building Block 4: High-Quality Early Childhood Education**

**What is High-Quality Early Childhood Education?** High quality early childhood education has many features, but three are critical. First, high quality early childhood education is based on a genuine partnership between the child's educator (i.e., teacher, family child care provider) and the parent. Both need to work with each other to support the child's learning. Second, it allows children time to learn through play – to explore and take part in a variety of learning experiences. Finally, it supports all aspects of a child's learning and development – identity, social interaction and behavior, physical well-being, learning, and communication.

There are numerous early childhood education programs serving young children and families throughout the region. These programs include family, group-family, and center-based child care, Early Head Start and Head Start, Universal Prekindergarten, nursery schools and preschools, and programs for children with developmental delays and disabilities. Most of these programs are regulated by either the state or federal government. While Early Head Start and Head Start performance standards are comprehensive and support programs in improving program quality, child care regulations are basically designed to ensure the health and safety of the children without regard to other aspects of high-quality programming.

**Why does High-Quality Early Childhood Education matter?** Decades of research have shown that high-quality early childhood education results in long-term benefits for children. Study after study has shown that those children who receive high-quality early childhood education are more likely to succeed in school and in life, starting in kindergarten and continuing through adulthood.

One study (i.e., High Scope) has tracked children who participated in high-quality, comprehensive early childhood education programs for over 40 years. The study found that participating children were less likely than their peers, who did not participate in such a program, to become involved in the juvenile and criminal justice system, had lower rates of teen-age pregnancy, were more likely to graduate from high school, and had higher incomes. Other studies have proven conclusively that high-quality early childhood education programs had lasting effects on IQ, boosted academic and economic achievement and helped prevent the incidence of chronic disease and obesity in adulthood.

More recent studies show that quality early childhood education provides persistent boosts in social-emotional skills. For example, data from the Perry Preschool Program shows that increased academic motivation creates 30% of the effects on achievement and 40% on

employment for females. Reduced externalizing behavior creates a 65% reduction in lifetime violent crime, 40% reduction in lifetime arrests and 20% reduction in unemployment. <sup>1</sup>

**What is the return on dollars invested in High-Quality Early Childhood Education?** A critical time to shape productivity is from birth to age five, when the brain develops rapidly to build the foundation of cognitive and character skills necessary for success in school, health, career and life. Early childhood education fosters cognitive skills along with attentiveness, motivation, self-control and sociability—the character skills that turn knowledge into know-how and people into productive citizens. Noble laureate economist James Heckman’s analysis of the Perry Preschool program shows a 7% to 10% per year return on investment based on increased school and career achievement as well as reduced costs in remedial education, health and criminal justice system expenditures. It is very likely that many other early childhood programs are equally effective. Analysts of the Chicago Child–Parent Center study estimated \$48,000 in benefits to the public per child from a half-day public preschool for at-risk children. Participants at age 20 were estimated to be more likely to have finished high school—and were less likely to have been held back, need remedial help, or have been arrested. The estimated return on investment was \$7 for every dollar invested.

**What needs to be done to make High-Quality Early Childhood Education available to all families who need these services in the region?** The Adirondack Birth to Three Alliance is supporting the implementation of a statewide early childhood education continuous quality improvement initiative – QUALITYstarsNY - in early childhood education programs across the region. QUALITYstarsNY uses a comprehensive set of program standards that have been shown by the research to lead to positive outcomes for children. To help programs achieve these standards, QUALITYstarsNY provides technical assistance to help programs and providers to develop individualized quality improvement plans and then supports programs in implementing their plan by providing fiscal incentives and access to staff training and technical assistance often provided by our local child care resource and referral agencies. Currently 25 programs and providers in the region are participating in QUALITYstarsNY and efforts will continue to increase participation as funding for QUALITYstarsNY allows. The Adirondack Birth to Three Alliance works closely with the quality improvement specialist working with programs in the region to provide whatever assistance she needs to help the programs improve their services. This includes program recruitment and making information about QUALITYstarsNY readily available to early childhood education programs and providers.

In addition to supporting implementation of QUALITYstarsNY, the Adirondack Foundation’s Small Grants for Small Children initiative provides needed funds to programs to purchase

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<sup>1</sup> Elango, Sneha, Andrés Hojman, Jorge Luis García, and James J. Heckman. (2016). “Early Childhood Education.” Forthcoming, in Moffitt, Robert (ed.), *Means-Tested Transfer Programs in the United States II*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

equipment, curricula materials, provide professional development opportunities to staff, and address other critical funding needs. The Adirondack Birth to Three Alliance has supported the Small Grants for Small Children program by getting the word out to eligible providers across the region. Also, the Adirondack Birth to Three Alliance is working with ACAP to replicate School Fuel in Essex County and, if it is successful, the Alliance will support its expansion across the region. School Fuel was developed in Connecticut and is designed to support early childhood educators help parents limit the amount of screen time that their children engage in and make sure that the programming their children do watch is developmentally appropriate.

In addition to improving quality, there is critical need to increase availability of services. Several areas in the region are without a sufficient supply of providers. Due to the inability of families in the North Country to pay even close to the true cost of care, many child care centers are considering closing. Family and group family child care providers also face economic hardship due to the cost of care and struggle with meeting increasing regulatory requirements. To help to address this problem, the Adirondack Birth to Three Alliance supported the Child Care Council of the North Country and the ACAP Child Care Resource and Referral Program's successful application for the Adirondack Foundation's Generous Act funding to recruit and provide preliminary training to new early childhood education providers in areas of the region that lack providers. But, significantly more will need to be done to stem this growing crisis.