Iowa families need access to affordable child care and preschool to support working parents and to ensure that children start kindergarten ready to learn. During the first five years of life, children learn critical skills such as language and socio-emotional regulation, which provide a foundation for lifelong learning. High-quality preschool and child care can support healthy development and enable parents to work. Unfortunately, too many children are left behind by the status quo. In fact, differences in children’s cognitive abilities by income are evident at only 9 months old and significantly widen by the time children are age 2. Early learning has positive impacts for children, families, and the economy. It’s time to work to put these programs within reach.

Iowa families need access to high-quality child care and preschool

Iowa has 261,667 children under age 6, 75 percent of whom have all available parents in the workforce.

High-quality child care and preschool programs help narrow school readiness gaps, which is particularly important for children of color and those living in low-income families. Thirty-six percent of Iowa children under age 6 live in low-income families.

The supply of high-quality child care is limited. Many states have implemented quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) to assess and support quality in early care and education programs. Currently, 35 percent of Iowa child care centers participate in QRIS.

The cost of child care is out of reach for families

Annual costs at a child care center in Iowa average $18,448 for an infant and a 4-year-old, which is 27 percent of the median income for families with children.

For low-income families and people of color, the average cost of child care would constitute the majority of income in most cases.
The current child care system is failing Iowa families
On average, the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) serves only 11 percent of federally eligible children in Iowa. This results in only 16,500 Iowa children served through CCDBG funds. Of those served, 52 percent attend licensed or regulated center-based care.

Iowa families need greater access to high-quality preschool programs
Iowa has two preschool programs: the Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program and the Shared Visions Preschool Program. The Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program is available to all 4-year-olds in the state. The Shared Visions program is available to children ages 3 through 5 and is a targeted program in which 80 percent of children must qualify for free lunch. This preschool program meets, on average, 6.9 quality benchmarks set by the National Institute for Early Education Research and spends $3,386 annually per student.

In Iowa, 9 percent of 3-year-olds and 68 percent of 4-year-olds are enrolled in a public preschool program.

Investing in high-quality early learning programs affects economies
Making child care more affordable for families can increase mothers’ workforce participation, resulting in a boost to the state’s economy.

In Iowa, if child care costs did not exceed more than 10 percent of a family’s income, the state's economy would increase nearly $17.93 million.

We can do better for Iowa families
The Center for American Progress proposes two solutions to put high-quality child care and preschool within reach for Iowa families and create an early childhood learning continuum for children:

- If child care costs are capped at 10 percent of a family’s income, Iowa families would save $3,145 a year.
- Voluntary universal preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds. This would increase access for 58,900 children in Iowa.


8 Note: IL, NH, and OK require participation in QRIS or it’s required by licensing standards, and therefore participation is listed as 100 percent. FL has three regional QRIS with available data: MD is Miami-Dade County, PB is Palm Beach County, and D is Duval County.


18 Ibid.

19 Note: In states that do not serve 3-year-olds or with no state-funded preschool program, enrollment rates include federal Head Start only.


22 Ibid.

23 Author’s analysis based on data from Child Care Aware of America, “Parents and the High Cost of Child Care” and the 2015 U.S. median income as measured by Kids Count Data Center. See Kids Count Data Center, “Median Family Income Among Households With Children.”
