



D.C. Can't Have Economic Recovery Without Child Care Investments

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed and compounded existing issues of access, quality, equity and funding in the District of Columbia's early learning (or "child care")¹ system for families with infants, toddlers and children too young to attend elementary school. Investments in our early learning system are a necessity for reopening the District and supporting long-term economic recovery. This system was already fragile financially before the pandemic — with programs operating on thin margins — and will not survive unless dedicated recovery funding is provided. Workers with young children will not return to work without safe and affordable child care.

Two recent surveys² conducted among teachers, owners and directors of early learning programs by the District of Columbia Association for the Education of Young Children (DCAEYC) and the Under 3 DC Coalition (Under 3 DC) shed light on the looming and overlooked child care crisis. Following are five key takeaways and recommendations designed to help policymakers, funders and advocates make informed decisions about where resources are needed most in the District to support families with young children as businesses begin to reopen and temporary work-from-home options are phased out.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Child care programs have been left out of COVID-19 relief funding

Small Business Administration (SBA) loans, such as the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), and other relief funding used to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic are not getting to child care programs, which are owned and operated primarily by women and people of color in the District. The lack of access to public dollars is putting child care programs at risk for permanent closure. It is important to note that child care programs typically operate under slim margins prior to COVID-19 and will require public funding to remain open.

- Fewer than one-fourth of respondents received a PPP loan and only two respondents (out of 37 who applied) received the D.C. Small Business Microgrant. (*Under 3 DC survey*)
- Respondents indicated a variety of barriers to applying for the D.C. Small Business Microgrant, including confusion about requirements, difficulty navigating the application process, being unable to meet the deadline for application, and being unaware that the program was available. (*Under 3 DC survey*)

- One-fifth of respondents (20%) said that the challenges that they encountered when applying for an SBA loan, such as PPP, include the following: the unpreparedness of banks, never hearing back from the bank on inquiries, the program quickly running out of funds, and lack of clarity on requirements. (DCAEYC survey)

DO NOW

Like other states³, create dedicated emergency public funding for all child care programs in the District of Columbia.

2. Child care shortage is rapidly becoming a crisis during COVID-19

Without dedicated public funding support, D.C. may lose more than 6,500 early learning seats, limiting access to licensed child care for families with young children and infants. The District already lacks sufficient high-quality early learning programs across all neighborhoods. Families with low incomes bear a disproportionate burden, and their needs should be prioritized.

Pre-K–12 education is publicly funded by a per-pupil formula in D.C., so closing schools during the pandemic will not jeopardize their future existence. Early learning programs, however, lack access to stable, consistent public dollars to support our youngest learners, which is why they are at risk for permanent closure. As D.C. residents return to work and fewer licensed child care programs exist, unlicensed care may become the more affordable and available option.

20%

Percentage of
child care supply
that could be lost

6,596

Licensed child
care slots that
could be lost

2.01

Children per
slot, pre-
COVID-19

2.51

Estimated
children per slot,
post-COVID-19

SOURCE: Center for American Progress and National Association for the Education of Young Children <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/news/2020/04/24/483817/coronavirus-pandemic-lead-permanent-loss-nearly-4-5-million-child-care-slots/> and National Association for the Education of Young Children https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/effects_of_coronavirus_on_child_care.final.pdf

DO NOW

Continue to document the loss of licensed child care seats. To better serve families and their children across the learning continuum starting at birth, early learning programs need dedicated, sustainable, local funding streams to provide child care programs the same stability as Pre-K–12 learning in schools. The District needs to create a sustainable, local fund stream to maintain a high-quality early learning system.

3. **After loss in revenue, lack of child care is the most common concern among small business owners amid COVID-19**

Business leaders recognize the importance of child care to support the District's economic recovery. It will allow current employees to return to work and keep other prospective employees in the workforce. We have seen this before. When pre-K for 3- and 4-year-olds became fully publicly funded in 2008 — free, full-day and accessible for virtually every family — the maternal labor force participation among low- and high-income women increased by 10 percentage points.



“While we are grappling with the challenges created by COVID-19, we know we’ll be back, along with the rest of the D.C. workforce. And, in the meantime, we can’t afford to lose our system of child care that enables people at all levels to work.”

— GREGORY MCCARTHY⁴

“Child care providers are a core part of the infrastructure that keeps the District running. Providers furnish needed services for working families, including the children of first responders and health care professionals. Even during normal times, child care providers play a critical role in supporting working families in Washington and beyond.”

— BARBARA B. LANG⁵

DO NOW

The District's economic recovery plans should set aside funding to secure the thousands of child care seats at risk of being lost. Without this dedicated child care funding, the District's economic recovery will be impeded.

4. **High-quality early learning programs support child development through positive interactions with peers and trained educators**

When District residents return to work, they will need access to safe, reliable, high-quality child care. Children may need additional support as they transition back to child care programs. Like older students who may experience learning loss, it will be essential for young children who have had their early education disrupted due to the pandemic to return to high-quality early learning programs that support their cognitive and socioemotional development to prepare them for kindergarten and beyond. Lack of access to high-quality child care will prolong the post-COVID-19 economic recovery for the District and may negatively impact children's early learning and development.

“The District has become a national model for high-quality 0-5 early care and education (ECE) systems — programs that support child development, family engagement and teacher excellence. Quality ECE is a game changer, and smart District money should go to the game changers with the highest ROI (return on investment). Ensuring a strong, quality ECE system will give immediate payoff by getting parents safely back to work, and also provide a longer-term payoff through children who thrive socially, emotionally and cognitively, and who are equipped to be our future leaders.”

– PYPER DAVIS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, EDUCARE DC

“Many families depend on the early learning programs we provide in our homes. Young children must be safe in our home-based programs, and we must also provide the type of experiences they need to thrive and develop. This requires skilled educators who understand child development and effective early care and education practices.”

– MULUWORK KENEA, DIRECTOR, AMEN FAMILY CHILD CARE

DO NOW

Ensure policies and funding incentivize for quality early learning programs in D.C.

5. Enrollment will be gradual as child care builds capacity and families become more comfortable with safety provisions put in place

District families need to have reassurance that their children are in a safe environment when they are at work, and early learning educators (in both centers and family child care homes) also need to feel safe to provide high-quality early learning. The DCAEYC survey found that, even with the option to remain open, 83% of respondents said their programs closed out of concern for the health and safety of children, families and staff. Reopening will require not just a slow return to full revenue but a host of new costs as programs meet new safety and health standards and expectations. In fact, in the Under 3 DC survey, 90% of providers projected that they will incur additional costs upon reopening, while two-thirds are concerned about having to reduce enrollment (70%) and having insufficient revenue (60%). In the DCAEYC survey, 39% of respondents said their top pandemic-related concern was “paying staff or paying myself as a solo provider.”



“I have kids and all of them have asthma. That’s a big issue for me. I have a 13-year-old, 5-year-old and 5-month old. My biggest concern for them going back to school and child care is that I want them to be safe and want to make sure that they don’t come home with anything. I just started a job, and I’m going to have to go back to work eventually.”

– TY WRIGHT, WARD 8 PARENT

“I need extra funding to purchase COVID-19 health and safety supplies. The demand for gloves, bleach, disinfectant spray, toilet tissues, hand soap, face masks, etc. is [making them] expensive.”

– D.C. CHILD CARE PROVIDER

“We are becoming increasingly aware that reopening will be a more costly model. For example, reduced class sizes to meet new CDC guidelines and increases in cleaning costs are expenses we cannot simply transfer to families. Early education in D.C. is already costly and families are also facing various challenges themselves. We will need support to continue to provide a safe space and quality care and education for children, families, and our staff.”

– BERNA ARTIS, HEAD OF SCHOOL, SCHOOL FOR FRIENDS

DO NOW

It will be essential for the District to provide long-term child care stabilization funds to maintain early learning seats as programs build back to full capacity so that child and staff safety — not funding needs — drive provider decisions about how and when to increase capacity. Programs also will have additional health and safety costs and will need support to source various supplies, such as gloves, masks and disinfectant.

1. In this document, child care and early learning are used interchangeably.
2. The DC Association for the Education of Young Children survey findings focused on the District of Columbia were pulled from a National Association for the Education of Young Children survey. There were 85 respondents who are based in the District of Columbia. The Under 3 DC Coalition conducted a survey of early learning operators and owners who are based in the District of Columbia. There were 106 respondents. Both surveys were self-administered online among a nonrandom sample of early learning program teachers, owners and directors serving in the District of Columbia.
3. For more information on dedicated state funds for child care, see “Governors Lead the Way in Responding to Child Care Needs Amid the Coronavirus Crisis” from the Center for American Progress, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/news/2020/05/07/484733/governors-lead-way-responding-child-care-needs-amid-coronavirus-crisis/>.
4. For more information, see “Investing in High-Quality Early Programs Today Builds the Workforce of Tomorrow” from Ready Nation, <https://www.strongnation.org/articles/1176-investing-in-high-quality-early-programs-today-builds-the-workforce-of-tomorrow>.
5. For more information, see “In Good Times and Challenging Times, Child Care Helps Make D.C. Work” from Ready Nation, <https://www.strongnation.org/articles/1177-in-good-times-and-challenging-times-child-care-helps-make-d-c-work>

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District of Columbia Association for
the Education of Young Children



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