

# Investing in Alaska's Young Children



## Alaska Early Care and Learning: Public Policy Priorities for 2014

### Action for 2014

#### Quality Early Care and Learning

- Increase Child Care Assistance to align with current market rates and adjust the Family Income and Contribution Scale to provide equitable access to child care for working families.
- Increase investment to thread to respond to growing needs of families in their search for child care and increased demands for professional development and support to advance the availability of quality child care across Alaska.
- Increase state investment in Head Start and Pre-K programs so additional children in Alaska can be served.

#### Strengthening Families

- Increase investment in Parents as Teachers to strengthen parent knowledge of early childhood development and improve parenting practices so children are healthy, safe, and ready to learn.
- Maintain investment in Infant Learning Programs to continue to provide essential early intervention services to children with developmental disabilities/delays and children who experience abuse and/or neglect.
- Maintain investment in the statewide Strengthening Families Initiative which provides resources to family service organizations and programs to build protective factors and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect.

#### Community Engagement and Early Literacy

- Increase investment in Best Beginnings to provide Imagination Library books to more children, support locally based solutions, and promote parent and community engagement in early learning.

Our children, birth to 5, are best served by a unified, sustainable system—a system composed of early care and learning, health, and family support. A coalition of early childhood experts and leading organizations with representation across Alaska is working to increase the number of children ready to succeed in school, and beyond. The Alaska Early Childhood Advocacy Group has established a set of priorities to meet Alaska's early care and learning needs.

Research shows that participation in quality early childhood programs has long term gains for all children. Yet, only 1 in 5 children benefit from participation in some level of early childhood services. Moreover, science tells us that during the first three years of life, the brain undergoes extraordinary development as children are acquiring the ability to think, speak, learn, and reason. Investment in families with young children is a social, economic, and education imperative for the future success of Alaska.

*“Early childhood education is the driver of better outcomes and returns in secondary and higher education, health and economic development.”*

*- James Heckman  
Nobel Laureate Economist*



*These priorities align with recommendations made by the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council (AECCC). Information on the Council may be found at [www.dhss.alaska.gov/ocs/pages/AECCC](http://www.dhss.alaska.gov/ocs/pages/AECCC).*

## **Quality Early Care and Learning**

**Support Alaska's workforce with access to child care that is Licensed, Safe, Healthy, and Playful:** Early care and learning services make it possible for 32,300 Alaskans to participate in the labor force. This accounts for 10% of all Alaska resident wages, over \$1.1 billion. A rate adjustment is critical to **Child Care Assistance rates** (flat funded for over four years) to ensure parents have access to employment opportunities. Over 60% of children spend at least part of their day in non-parental care. The quality and stability of child care is therefore critical to a child's success when entering the school system. In order to respond to the growing need for accessibility to quality child care, **thread**, Alaska's Child Care Resource and Referral Network, is in need of sufficient funding to meet the demand of services. Over 8,000 families and 3,000 early educators depend on thread each year to secure their need for child care and to receive professional development and technical assistance support. **Tax Incentives** for employer-sponsored child care is an effective strategy to increase the availability of care for working families.

**Progress toward development of a Quality Rating System:** A Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) is now in development and will provide a sustainable systematic approach to assess, recognize, and reward early care and education programs while providing a pathway to continually improve the quality of care. QRIS provides financial, training and technical assistance support for participating programs and serves as a bridge to bring together all early childhood programs under one vision of care and education. A QRIS will provide families access to quality care information in order to make better informed decisions for their children.

**Head Start and Pre-K Programs :** According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) - 2012 State of Preschool report, 42% of 4-year-old children across the United States are enrolled in either Head Start, State Pre-K, or are in a Special Education Program. In Alaska only 21% of the 4-year-old population, *half* the national average, is served by one of these three programs. Helping Alaska's most vulnerable children and families prepare for success before they reach school age is a crucial investment that produces positive outcomes. Serving 200 additional children will decrease the current waiting list of more than 1,200 children who have applied to attend Head Start Programs in Alaska but cannot due to limited space available.

## **Strengthening Families**

**Parents as Teachers (PAT)** is a universal, evidence-based home visiting model serving prenatal woman and families with children between the ages of 0 and 5. As a parent education and support program, PAT is designed to respect parents as their child's first and most influential teacher, and helps build a strong foundation for their children's future success in school and life. PAT is currently offered in over 35 Alaska communities, and served over 1,000 children during the 2012-2013 program year.

**Strengthening Families** is a proven, cost-effective approach to building Protective Factors around children by supporting family strengths and resiliency. The Protective Factor framework builds parental resilience, social connections, concrete support in times of need, knowledge of parenting and child development, and social and emotional competence of children. Research studies support the common-sense notion that when these Protective Factors are well established in a family, the likelihood of child abuse and neglect diminishes. Research shows that these Protective Factors are also "promotive" factors that build family strengths and a family environment that promotes optimal child and youth development. Strengthening Families continues to be a proven and effective model across Alaska.

## **Community Engagement and Early Literacy**

**Best Beginnings** supports diverse groups in 106 communities so that young children are prepared for success in school, and in life. Early Childhood Partnerships and Imagination Libraries receive resources – ongoing support, training, and matching funds – according to approved plans. Seven Early Childhood Partnerships are coming up with innovative ways to collaborate, use resources more effectively, and help families prepare children for kindergarten. More than 21,400 children 0-5 in 106 Alaska communities receive a free book in the mail every month through Imagination Library. Evaluation results are positive. Children enrolled for longer than one year were more enthusiastic about reading, and their parents felt they were better prepared for kindergarten. Best Beginnings' resources, like the website, radio and TV spots, *Babies on Track*, and *Words Count*, promote parent and community engagement in early learning.