

2024 Early Childhood Legislative Recommendations

THE MISSISSIPPI LABOR FORCE NEEDS A STABLE CHILD CARE SYSTEM

FIVE THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION AND THE MISSISSIPPI WORKFORCE:

1 The child care system is collapsing in what economists call a market failure.

Most programs are unable to charge the true cost of services and instead have to rely on what families can afford. Poor conditions and low pay fuel high turnover, and the educator exodus has only worsened since the pandemic. Faced with difficulty hiring new staff, programs are shutting their doors across the country, and without options for their children, many parents - especially women - leave the workforce.

2 The child care industry is important to the economic growth of the state.

According to a news report in the Daily Journal on December 20, 2023, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported Mississippi had the lowest rate of workforce participation in the nation of 53.9% in October. The national rate was more than 62%. According to Cory Miller, state economist, there are many possible reasons for the low number; one of which is access to affordable child care.

3 Like Mississippi's strong PreK programs, early care and education for children under age four benefits everyone.

Starting at birth, early learning opportunities are critical to children's brain development and lead to improved outcomes in school and later in life. The long-term economic gains and efficiencies borne out by a robustly funded, high-quality ECE system would far outpace the costs.

4 Mississippi child care educators have one of the worst-paid jobs in the United States; 98% of all other jobs are paid higher wages.

In a recent survey of 661 child care teachers, 1/3 reported they received some sort of federal assistance; although, 70% responded that they worked over 40 hours per week. They are more likely to lack health insurance than the national average, and they experience high levels of food insecurity. Poverty rates for early educators are double those of other workers, and on average, eight times higher than those of K-8 teachers.

5 Even though educators are poorly paid, parents struggle to afford the cost of programs, and the existing subsidy system is insufficient.

In Mississippi, child care costs families an average of \$5,436 per year; in some places, it is more expensive than housing, health care, and community college tuition. Only 36% of eligible children, age three to five, access federally funded Head Start programs, and less than 20% of eligible children receive subsidized child care through the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG). Check your state to see what fraction of eligible families are reached by current public funding. school-based prekindergarten

SOLUTION

According to the 2023 Mississippi Child Care Teachers' Wages survey, child care teachers who responded are overworked and underprepared. Over one-third of respondents stated they looked for a new job within the last three months, and of those respondents, 78% searched for a job outside of the child care industry. Higher wages and benefits are needed to stabilize the Mississippi child care workforce, and a pay raise as small as \$5.00 per hour could keep child care workers in this critical field. If we want to ensure that Mississippi parents have the child care they need so they can get to work, we need to focus on ensuring that the workforce behind the workforce is paid fairly for the essential work they do.

TAKE ACTION

We recommend that a bill be drafted to allocate \$15 million to pilot a program. These funds will serve over 1600 young children at a cost of \$888 per child and up to 2400 child care teachers. This is likely over 20% of the child care teacher workforce to stabilize the child care workforce thereby increasing the number of working parents able to accept jobs and decreasing the Mississippi worker shortage in all other fields, including healthcare, technology, and manufacturing.

We also recommend that the educational, employment, or workforce-related agency will be responsible for either paying out these funds to eligible child care teachers who apply, OR contracting with an eligible entity to do so for a cost of less than 10%.

MISSISSIPPI CHILDREN NEED A STRONG EARLY INTERVENTION SYSTEM

FOUR THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT EARLY INTERVENTION AND ITS LONG TERM VALUE FOR OUR STATE:

- 1 IDEA Part C authorizes each state to implement a statewide system that provides early intervention services to infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families.**

Children under the age of three who demonstrate a developmental delay or have been diagnosed with a physical or mental condition that has a high probability of resulting in a developmental delay are eligible to receive Part C services.

- 2 Strong Early Intervention can increase the rate of return on investment.**

The highest rate of return in early childhood development comes from investing as early as possible, from birth through age five, in disadvantaged families. The earlier the investment, the greater the return - i.e. Intervention is likely to be more effective and less costly when it is provided early in life rather than later.

- 3 Early Intervention programs reduce the need for special education.**

The National Early Intervention Longitudinal Study (NEILS) tracked children with a developmental delay and determined that 46% did not need special education by the time they reached kindergarten as a result of early intervention services.

- 4 Enrollment in Mississippi's program is very low compared to other states and the national average.**

Mississippi serves only 1.52% (1,592) of the state's birth to three population which ranks the program 49th in the nation. The national average of children receiving services through IDEA Part C is 3.88%. In a brief published by the Center for Mississippi Health Policy, an estimated 13% of Mississippi's birth to three population have developmental delays that make them potentially eligible for IDEA Part C services.

SOLUTION

S.B. 2167 in 2023 required that an Early Intervention Task Force be created to review and evaluate many aspects of the early intervention program, such as the infrastructure, billing and reimbursement procedures, service satisfaction, and service delivery models in surrounding states. In a report released by the task force, the findings and recommendations they determined fall into three categories: restructuring the First Steps program and service delivery model; additional funding and resources needed to support early intervention services; and improvement of MSDH's policies, procedures, and processes.

TAKE ACTION

The following legislative recommendations come directly from the Early Intervention Task Force Report. We ask that you take action on these recommendations:

- 1. Increase the appropriation provided to MSDH to support the First Steps program.**
- 2. Require Mississippi Department of Health (MSDH) to develop a plan for implementing a new service delivery model, including a new billing and reimbursement system, such as the 'pay and chase model' with the plan being due to the Legislature on or before December 1, 2024.**
- 3. Extend the Early Intervention Task Force to serve in an advisory capacity to assist MSDH in implementing a new model, including adding representatives from the Mississippi Division of Medicaid and the Mississippi Department of Education.**
- 4. Require the Task Force and PEER staff to assist MSDH with the research and development of the billing and reimbursement plan; and, ensure services provided in the natural environment are reimbursable.**
- 5. Require MSDH to submit updates to the Legislature and PEER regarding implementation of recommendations in this report; and that the early intervention program to be reviewed in three to five years.**