

## **It's Time for Transformational Investments in Early Childhood in Delaware.**

### **Help Advocates Make It Happen**

Donald Parsons

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Following a long legal career that culminated in serving as a Vice Chancellor on the Delaware Court of Chancery, I became interested in doing what I could to improve the quality of life in Wilmington and beyond.

My goals aligned with those of the Rotary Club of Wilmington, where I have been a member for more than twenty years. The club coalesced around early childhood education as a pivotal ingredient in making Wilmington a world-class city. That was a big vision. We hoped, however, that through education and advocacy, we could help make substantial progress on that ingredient.

Today, I realize there are very few issues that are as impactful for working families as early childhood education, especially for those Delawareans struggling to make a family sustaining income.

Delaware has made progress over the last few years—but progress has been incremental. We've slowly bumped up state reimbursement levels for Purchase of Care, the subsidy that helps cover tuition for low-income families. We also have expanded access to state benefits (from 185% of the Federal Poverty Level to 200%). Make no mistake, these are positive developments—but they are not the transformative changes we need to make to support working families and foster a robust and sustainable child care industry.

Why transformational change? As outlined by a generation of doctors, health professionals, and brain science experts, as well as community members found within this journal—early educational experiences are critical to giving children a good start in life. Taken more broadly, early child care and education are essential building blocks for all of Delaware, from the economy and public health, to the wellbeing of young children today and in the future.

In an important election season, Delaware has an opportunity to give kids a strong start, pay early childhood educators equitably, invest in population health, and improve long-term health outcomes and life spans. Transformative investment will yield a transformative return on investment for our state's economy in the short- and long term. Quality care and education for children from birth to age five not only allows more parents to participate in the workforce and further their careers and education, it also better equips their children to succeed in school and life.

Unfortunately, Delaware lags significantly behind our neighboring states and most other states in making quality early education accessible and affordable to middle class families. Here, a family of four with two adults each making next year's minimum wage (\$15 per hour or \$60,000 per year) finally will qualify for state supported child care. A family with any higher income would not. Yet, early child care and education is financially out of reach for many families that make between \$60,000 and \$100,000.<sup>1</sup>

It's time for Delaware to step up, and for each of us to be a part of the growing multitude of advocates. Contact your legislator and other elected officials and ask them how they will expand access to high-quality early care and education in our state.

With help from Rotary, as well as groups like the First State Pre-K coalition, the Delaware Association for the Education of Young Children, and numerous others—the child care message is beginning to spread. We need more people coming to meetings, sending emails, and keeping the pressure on state leaders for true, transformative change.

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## References

1. Delaware Department of Health and Social Services. (n.d.). Child Care Services. Retrieved from <https://dhss.delaware.gov/dss/childcr.html>

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