

Early Education is the Civil Rights and Public Health Issue of the Century

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Every city and state in the U.S. should measure human capitalization rates (HCR). HCR is a measure of how well a city or state supports, educates and empowers its citizens to meaningfully contribute to society. It is leadership's job to ensure that investment in education and human capital essential services yield substantial returns in terms of economic growth, social wellbeing, access to healthcare, and overall quality of life.

Our systems should be aimed to lead its citizens to achieve these four outcomes:

1. Economic independence
2. Strong and positive social networks
3. Civic engagement
4. Good health and wellbeing

If, as a nation, we focus on and refine systems toward this goal, we would strengthen our democracy. Our democracy is weakened when we do not have educated, informed and engaged citizens. The rising polarization in our country is a byproduct of growing disconnection, hopelessness, and fear often flamed by social media.

The root cause is our lack of will to prioritize investments in universal systems that lead to improved HCR. This is why I am a staunch advocate for ensuring every child has access to high-quality early education, regardless of the zip code they are born into. I believe it is a civil right to be supported to have the tools to fully participate in our democracy.

There is no more important tool or investment that we as a society make than an investment in early education. We have plenty of data and science that tells us of the value of early education and the transformative impact it has on our children.

Today, we know the importance of attachment theory—the need for children in the first five years of their lives to have a bond with caring adults that sing, touch, read, feed and protect them. We know that 90 percent of a child's brain is developed in the first five years of their lives.¹ We know that the first 1,000 days of a child's life is a period of exponential growth.² We know from science that when we provide children with proper nutrition, healthcare and a supportive environment, it leads to long term benefits for our society.³⁻⁵

Dr. James Heckman, esteemed professor at the University of Chicago has proven through research that for every dollar we invest in early childhood education, we get nearly a \$16 return as a society.^{6,7} Despite the overwhelming evidence of the importance of early education and the importance of day care and preschools, in an economy that, for most families, requires the caregivers to work, we woefully under-invest in early education systems across the country.⁸

Our lack of willingness to make adequate investment is constraining our potential as a nation. Children are being born into poverty, which too often leads to hopelessness and despair.⁹ Too many children are entering school up to nine months behind the readiness standards for

kindergarten. This may result in long-term academic struggles, increased need for special services, behavioral and social challenges, and higher retention rates, among other negative outcomes.¹⁰

We know the solution to the problem begins with investing early. Research affirms investing in early learning is the right thing to do, and gives the supports caregivers need. We just need the willingness and coordination to get it done, and the collective understanding that advocating for investment in early childhood education is more than just about providing care for children while their parents work. Advocacy for proper early childhood education is a civil rights issue. It is about protecting our democracy, which requires an educated and informed citizenry—citizens that have the critical thinking skills to discern between misinformation and disinformation; citizens that are civically engaged and push on policymakers for solutions.

As an informed citizen and leader of one of the state’s largest nonprofits, I advocate passionately for adequate funding to ensure every child has access to high-quality learning opportunities. Today at the YMCA of Delaware, we operate three early learning centers, and we are very proud that 92% of the children that attend those centers meet the developmental markers for readiness for kindergarten. All our centers operate on a flexible yet dynamic framework that has four pillars:

- 1.) Inspiring educators and environments.
- 2.) Parents are partners.
- 3.) Diverse and inclusive environments.
- 4.) Holistic curriculum and supports.

At the center of our approach is our commitment to drive continuous improvements.

In the fall of 2026, in partnership with the Community Education Building, we will open a fourth child care center in Wilmington. We plan to make this new center our innovation lab. We will build it with an eye toward encouraging collaboration amongst teachers, piloting emerging practices, codifying them, and taking them to scale not only for our network of YMCAs, but for the entire field. Partnering with the Community Education Building will also allow us to more intentionally and easily provide essential wraparound supports to the children and families. Unique to the YMCA, this investment in early learning is a critical investment in our pipeline of services from cradle to careers. While investing early is important, sustained support over time is even better to ensure transformational impact.

I invite and encourage you all to become more informed on this issue and demand your legislators to adequately invest in early children, because this is the civil rights issue of our century. Our democracy is dependent on it.

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