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In child care, quality counts

Maryland does better than most, but greater public investments are needed

By Margaret Williams

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This month, parents across the nation were greeted by a flurry of media coverage on a topic of perennial debate: the long-term effects of sending children to child care. During the past 20 years, parents have been buffeted by contradictory information about the effect of child care on aggressive behavior, attention span and cognitive ability.

The new data from the Early Child Care Research Network did little to reduce uncertainty. On one hand, the new findings report that teens who were in high-quality child care as young children scored slightly higher on academic and cognitive assessments and were slightly less likely to "act out" than peers who were in lower-quality child care as young children.

On the other hand, teens who had spent the most hours in child care were slightly more inclined toward impulsiveness and risk-taking at age 15 than peers who spent less time in child care.

Experts note that both effects — cognitive gains and behavioral risks — are modest and are far less significant than parental influence in long-term outcomes for children. Still, the bottom line for parents is that high-quality child care, relative to lower-quality care, is a plus for young children, providing them with an edge that lasts throughout their school years (and, other research shows, into adulthood).

So, how does Maryland rate on child care? And what options do parents have?

Parents will be glad to know that Maryland has long been regarded as one of the best states for child care. Thanks to several decades of focused effort to enhance programs, many children receive nurturing care from a consistent caregiver (limited staff turnover is key) who understands how to guide play so that it becomes learning. As a result, 78 percent of our 5-year-olds now arrive at kindergarten with the basic skills they need to succeed in school — compared with only 49 percent in 2001. And this early success is reflected in third grade reading scores, which have risen along with school readiness.

Many of the criteria that place Maryland near the top involve our strong state regulations on group size, adult-child ratios and safety. We have a framework, the

Maryland Model for School Readiness, that defines what children should know and be able to do by age 5, and child care programs are encouraged to use a curriculum that aligns with these expectations. Our public pre-K program is ranked as one of the top 10 in the nation. In addition, Maryland has the unique asset of having all the state's child care initiatives housed in the Maryland State Department of Education, where they are understood and valued as the front end of the learning continuum that begins at birth and lasts a lifetime.

The problem is that while many children benefit from nurturing, stimulating care, many others do not. About half our young children who are cared for by someone other than their parents are not in regulated child care programs; they are in "informal" child care with a family friend or neighbor who is unlikely to have any training in child development. Even among regulated programs, the quality of child care varies greatly. Because low compensation leads to high turnover (and even in Maryland, it is quite high), many programs are not effective in creating the trusting relationships between children and caregivers that are the prerequisite for all learning and development in young children.

To improve this situation, we need greater investment in early learning. More low-income parents must receive assistance in paying for quality care. More child care providers need financial assistance to enter the regulated system and to increase their knowledge and skills. Compensation for early childhood educators must increase so that the average income is not on a par with that of bellhops and dishwashers.

All of these improvements will require public investment. Some funds may be forthcoming from the federal level, where President Barack Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan both champion early learning. When the economy rebounds, the state should make early learning a spending priority, because such investment has been demonstrated time and again to be a wise fiscal decision for the state and an educational benefit for children.

Longitudinal studies repeatedly show that for every dollar invested in high-quality early care, there is a return of \$7 to \$16, depending on the nature and duration of the program. These savings are realized as children need fewer costly special education, grade retention and juvenile justice services. Also, as adults, these individuals are less likely to be incarcerated and more likely to be productive members of the community.

As many of us watch our graduating seniors walk across the stage this month, we are reminded that time flies. The 4-year old in child care today will be in the work force — or idled by insufficient education or incarceration — in the blink of an eye. What the new study tells us, yet again — for there is a mountain of research to this effect — is that during the early years, we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to tilt the developmental trajectory for each child toward a greater likelihood of success in school and in life.

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