

High Quality Affordable Child Care: A Definition  
(Revised)

Presented to  
Oregon's Early Learning Council

By  
The Child Care and Education Workgroup of the Early Learning Council  
on  
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As a Response to the Oregon Legislative Directive  
(HB 4165, Section 417.728, 2012)  
to  
Define High Quality Child Care

Research has documented that quality is found where significant adults and the larger community (government, philanthropy, faith-based organizations, non-profit, cultural-specific groups and other informal networks) support and nurture physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development in the individual child. Quality is an evaluative term and hence is tightly linked to a person's culture and values. Affordability focuses on the ability of families to access care and early learning experiences for their child. Quality and affordability are inextricably linked in efforts to use early learning experiences as a key strategy for ensuring kindergarten readiness for all of Oregon's children.

**Quality Child Care and Early Education.** In early care and education, researchers use the term "quality" to describe characteristics of early learning and development programs that research has demonstrated are associated with positive child outcomes<sup>1</sup>. In quality programs there is a committed, dynamic relationship between the family and the caregiver or teacher that works to define what the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive needs are for that individual child. The family brings family history, cultural and ethnic values, and current family needs to the relationship. The quality caregiver brings a nurturing environment, knowledge of child development and educational methodology, and the day-to-day observation of how the child relates to peers and the larger world when she is not with her family. In addition, she is able to identify and support the needs of children from diverse cultures and who speak a language other than English, ensuring culturally and linguistically responsive communication, activities and parent engagement. Together, family and caregiver work to provide quality care and education that will support healthy growth and increase the probability of future success. They communicate regularly about the growth and the obstacles to growth that come up in each of their separate relationships with the child and together find ways to collaborate for the child's benefit. Reaching Oregon's 40-40-20 goal requires investments early in the child's life. Educational equity requires that we address achievement gaps common to children of racial and ethnic minority families and those whose primary language is other than English. Research demonstrates that early investments in high quality early learning programs have the greatest potential for closing the achievement gap.<sup>2</sup>

The larger community supports quality in early childhood care and education and the family/provider relationship with an infrastructure that includes health/safety regulations, financial resources, a statewide system of support for families, and professional development for providers. The Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) brings together infrastructure components, increasing the ability of the system to support children and families<sup>3</sup>. The QRIS includes equity best practices to ensure providers from Oregon's communities of color have equal access to quality improvement opportunities training, and resources in diverse languages. Oregon provides education for parents and is developing supports for family, friend, and neighbor caregivers. Parent and caregiver education and supports are designed to enhance early learning and development in environments where children naturally are, whether at home with their parents or in the home of a caregiver. Additionally, Oregon reviews licensing rules including health and safety regulations on a regular basis. Proposed changes in federal rules for those who receive Child Care and Development Fund dollars would increase regulatory requirements for a substantial group of caregivers.<sup>4</sup>

**Affordability for Families.** Affordability is also based on a dynamic relationship between families, providers, and the larger community. Because families come from a range of economic circumstances, access to child care and early learning is uneven. Families balance a range of family needs and face numerous constraints, such as cost, access, and transportation. They choose what they perceive to be the best option for their child within constraints. Some families need help from the community to provide for their children's early care and education experiences. The Oregon Progress Board adopted a Benchmark that families pay no more than 10% of their gross monthly income on child care. Nationally, families in poverty who purchase care average 34% of household income spent on child care. This drops to 20% for low-income households (earning up to 200% of federal poverty level) and to 9% for those at or above 200% of the federal poverty level.<sup>5</sup> Given Oregon's Benchmark, making early learning experiences accessible to poor and low-income families presents a substantial financial challenge to the community.

The two major public investments in child care and early education are Head Start and the Child Care and Development Fund, the major revenue source for Employment Related Day Care (ERDC). In the 2012-13 school year, Oregon Head Start Prekindergarten programs served approximately 51% of eligible children<sup>6</sup>. In 2009, over Oregon 104,000 children were eligible for ERDC<sup>7</sup> but only a little over 13,000 children were served each month in Spring 2012<sup>8</sup>. Payment rates were adjusted in 2013, thus increasing access to many of the programs best able to meet the needs of these low-income children who are served by the subsidy program.

Investing in both families and providers is most likely to achieve quality, affordable care and the best possible outcomes for children.

**Affordability to Providers.** Providers offer the highest quality care that their income and education level will sustain. In order for providers from Oregon's communities of color to provide quality affordable child care, greater efforts must be made to provide professional development opportunities that are culturally relevant. For providers to be able to "afford" to do this work means they must be paid enough to cover the cost of doing business: earning an adequate wage as well as program costs such as food, learning materials, and healthy environments. In 2011, in an average child care center, teacher wages ranged between \$19,760 and \$28,683<sup>9</sup>. As with other human service jobs, wages are lower than those of persons with similar education and skills earn in other sectors. A frequent reason given by experienced child care professionals for leaving the field is that they can no longer "afford" to stay in business or work for low wages with few if any benefits. The resulting high turnover causes instability for children, adds substantial recruitment and training costs, and weakens the quality of the workforce. This also places a substantial burden on the community that is pulled in many different directions with limited resources.

**Affordability to the Larger Community.** Research demonstrates that investing early results in cost-effective payoffs for all.<sup>10</sup> Children thrive, families are more stable, and providers stay in the field longer and do better work. The larger community benefits from

reduced costs for programs that deal with school dropout rates, teen pregnancy, substance abuse and juvenile detention. Due to these reduced costs, return on investment studies show savings of up to \$7 for every \$1 spent on early education.<sup>11</sup> As children get older, each intervention is more expensive and predicts progressively higher rates of failure. Oregonians can afford to raise healthy, happy children from the beginning when the investment yields positive results for everyone. Ensuring accountability is essential for both public and private investments.

**Looking Forward.** The Early Learning Council and the Oregon Education Investment Board have adopted an Equity Lens as key to addressing the achievement gap for children/youth from Oregon's communities of color. Child care and education policies, programs and practices are now being viewed from a lens of equity. Its Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) provides a foundation for these efforts. QRIS standards define quality in concrete terms and make measurement of quality possible. Over the next few years Oregon will document the level of quality provided in a substantial portion of early learning programs. Quality ratings will provide decision makers at all levels (parents, providers, and policy makers) data needed to guide investments. Multiple strategies will become available to help all families, especially those with children with high needs, access care and education with documented ability to meet the developmental needs of children.

## Endnotes:

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- <sup>1</sup> Phillips, D. Mekos, D., Scarr, S., McCartney, K., & Abbott-Shim, M. (2000). Within and beyond the classroom door: Assessing quality in child care centers. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 15, (4).
- <sup>2</sup> Dearing, E., McCartney, K., & Taylor, B.A.(2009). Does higher quality early child care promote low-income children's math and reading achievement in middle childhood? *Child Development*, 80 (5), 1329–1349
- <sup>3</sup> Udell T. (2013, January). *Oregon's Quality Rating and Improvement System for centers and family Child care programs (registered & certified): Field test t=master document standards with indicators, criteria, and evidence*. Available upon request to [udellt@wou.edu](mailto:udellt@wou.edu).
- <sup>4</sup> An Oregon Child Care Research Partnership analysis shows that in Spring 2012 over 40% of certified programs receive some funding from the Child Care and Development Fund.
- <sup>5</sup> Smith, K. & Adams, N. (2013, May). *Child care subsidies critical for low-income families amid rising child care expenses*. Policy Brief No. 20. Downloaded on May 21, 2013 from [http://carseyinstitute.unh.edu/sites/carseyinstitute.unh.edu/files/publications/PB-Smith-Adams-Child-Care-Subsidies-web\\_0.pdf](http://carseyinstitute.unh.edu/sites/carseyinstitute.unh.edu/files/publications/PB-Smith-Adams-Child-Care-Subsidies-web_0.pdf)
- <sup>6</sup> Data available from Kara Williams ([kara.williams@state.or.us](mailto:kara.williams@state.or.us)), Oregon Department of Education.
- <sup>7</sup> Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, HHS. (2012, August). *Estimates of child care eligibility and receipt for fiscal year 2009*. Downloaded on May 31, 2013 from <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/12/childcareeligibility/ib.cfm#childcare3>
- <sup>8</sup> Weber, R.B., & Finders, J. Child care in Oregon and its Counties: 2012). Available for download from <http://health.oregonstate.edu/sbhs/family-policy-program/occrp-childcare-dynamics-publications>
- <sup>9</sup> Weber, R.B., & Finders, J. Child care in Oregon and its Counties: 2012). Downloaded on June 1, 2013 from <http://health.oregonstate.edu/sbhs/family-policy-program/occrp-childcare-dynamics-publications>
- <sup>10</sup> Heckman, J.(2001). Effecting child development strategies. In Zigler, E., Gilliam, W.S., & Barnett, S. (Eds). *The pre-k debates: Current controversies and issues*. Baltimore, MD: Paul Brookes Publishing Company. Downloaded on May 21, 2013 from [http://heckman.uchicago.edu/sites/heckman.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/Heckman\\_2010\\_Effective%20Child%20Devel%20Strategies.pdf](http://heckman.uchicago.edu/sites/heckman.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/Heckman_2010_Effective%20Child%20Devel%20Strategies.pdf)
- <sup>11</sup> Bruner, C. Stitch in time: Calculating the cost of school unreadiness. Downloaded on May 21, 2013 from <http://www.buildinitiative.org/WhatsNew/ViewArticle/tabid/96/smld/412/ArticleID/293/Default.aspx>