



# SOARING TO NEW HEIGHTS

The Status of Early Learning in Greater Kansas City  
AT A GLANCE • 2010



After **two decades** of hard work we are closer to our destination — a region where all children will enter school ready to succeed. And while there are still many bridges to cross before we get there, with the continued dedication of our community partners, leaders and staff, a better place for our children will not be much further ahead.

**The Metropolitan Council on Early Learning** produces this report to measure the progress of efforts to create a quality early learning system that provides opportunities to all families in the Kansas City region. Information is based on data collected in 2009.

# INTRODUCTION



In 2009, the Kansas City region reached a significant milestone — 20 years since a dedicated group of community leaders joined together and formed the Metropolitan Council on Child Care to make quality early learning available to all children in the region. Now called the Metropolitan Council on Early Learning (MCEL), much has been accomplished since 1989 to realize the vision that all children will enter school ready to succeed. Highlights of this work include:

## **Partners in Quality (PIQ)**

A group of dedicated community leaders from the public and private sectors that support efforts to improve early learning opportunities in Kansas City region. PIQ recently developed a strategic plan to guide many of our region's successful early learning initiatives. This work is driven by the vision to build a nationally unsurpassed early learning system.

## **Accreditation Project**

An initiative that supports family home providers and early learning centers to achieve accreditation. Accredited programs are committed to constant program improvement and have demonstrated the ability to provide quality experiences for children.

## **Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)**

MCEL has led the way to implement star rating systems for early learning programs in Kansas and Missouri. The QRIS is a proven approach that introduces continuous improvement methods and other critical supports, which results in sustained increases in program quality. As a potential consumer advocacy tool, QRIS ratings provide parents with useful information about the quality of the early learning programs their children attend.

## **Scholarships**

Studies show that when early learning providers and staff are engaged in their own education and professional development that program quality also benefits. MCEL provides resources that help early learning professionals continue their educations and receive valuable training.

## **Reaching New Heights**

Our region's gains in early learning are the results of dedicated stakeholders working together — the generous philanthropic community; the careful deliberation of community and business leaders; the advocacy of community organizations; residents who care about our children's future; public schools that provide early learning services; and our colleagues who bring new ideas to the table.

As illustrated by the title and design of this report, MCEL's work is reaching new heights. Building on the successes of the past two decades, our region continues to develop more quality early learning opportunities for children.

Much also depends on the will and demand of a well-informed public. A poll conducted in late 2008 by the Missouri Coalition for School Readiness showed strong support among Missouri voters for quality early learning and Pre-K programs. Key findings included:

1. Voters support investments in early learning, even during an economic downturn; and
2. Early learning ranked among the state's top issues, tied in importance with K-12 public education.





# INVESTING IN QUALITY

## Investing in Quality Early Learning Pays

Research on comprehensive, high-quality early learning shows that such programs are cost-effective investments that provide substantial economic and social benefits to communities. These include reducing the need for more expensive, less productive interventions for older children and adults.

Nobel Laureate economist, Dr. James Heckman, urges investing in early education to help children do better in school, which saves money down the road. Heckman argues that early interventions for disadvantaged children raises the quality of the workforce, enhances the productivity of schools and reduces crime, teenage pregnancy, and welfare dependency. Individuals who begin their academic careers with quality early learning are also more likely to earn higher wages and make valuable contributions to society. Focusing solely on earnings gains, annual returns on dollars invested are as high as 15-17 percent.

## THE HECKMAN EQUATION

<b>INVEST</b>	in education and development resources for disadvantaged families.
+	
<b>DEVELOP</b>	cognitive and social skills in children early – from birth to age five.
+	
<b>SUSTAIN</b>	early development with effective adult education.
=	
<b>GAIN</b>	a more productive, valuable workforce that pays America dividends.

[www.heckmanequation.org/about-professor-heckman](http://www.heckmanequation.org/about-professor-heckman)

## A Significant Return on Investment

In 2007, the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) released a study titled “Enriching Children, Enriching the Nation,” which determined that providing voluntary, high-quality, publicly-funded pre-kindergarten education for the poorest twenty-five percent of three and four year old children would have an enormous impact on everything from the nation’s annual budget to crime prevention. EPI estimates that these annual benefits would surpass the costs of the program within a six-year timeframe.

According to the study, the benefits of such a program would total \$315 billion by 2050, which includes \$83 billion in budgetary benefits for the government; \$156 billion for increased employment compensation; and \$77 billion resulting from savings associated with the reduction of crime and child abuse. These figures would exceed the costs of the program by a ratio of 12.1 to 1.





# ACCESS TO QUALITY

## Licensing

Licensed early learning centers and family child care programs in Kansas and Missouri are required to meet basic health and safety standards, as well as staff training and staff-to-child ratio requirements. Public school programs in both states and church-affiliated programs in Missouri are exempt from licensing, but are still required to meet some of the same health and safety standards.

## Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS)

MCEL's collaboration with state and local partners has led to the development of QRIS programs in Kansas and Missouri, which rate early learning program quality on a scale of 1 to 5 stars. Local pilot projects began in 2004 and transitioned into demonstration projects in 2008. More than 100 local programs participate in either KQRIS in Kansas, or QRS in Missouri, and the quality ratings of many of these programs were made public in June 2010. For more information contact the Family Conservancy at 913/342-1110.

## Accreditation

Accreditation is both a status and a process used to identify exemplary practices in a particular field. It represents an organization's commitment to quality standards and continuous improvement. Three leading accreditation programs are recognized by early learning programs in the Kansas City region: The National Association for the Education of Young Children, the National Association for Family Child Care Accreditation and Missouri Accreditation.

## Affordability and Access

Affordable child care is a key factor in a parent's ability to enter and remain in the workforce. The cost of child care can mean choosing between children and a job.

Early learning programs find that families are now having a more difficult time affording child care due to the recent economic downturn. Providers also indicated an increased need for family support services.

## Annual costs for early learning services (Approx.)

- Average cost of center-based preschool care = \$7,000
- Average cost of infant care = \$10,000

## Support services for low-income children in the Kansas City region

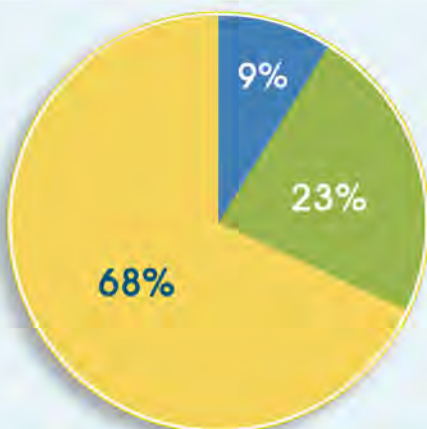
- Seven Head Start and Early Head Start grantees serve 4,366 children and families.
- Federal Child Care Development Block Grants provide subsidies for approximately 12,852 children each month, and funds \$48,500,000 in early learning services each year.

## Head Start Services

Head Start and Early Head Start are national school readiness programs that provide the Kansas City region's most vulnerable children access to comprehensive education, health, nutrition and parent involvement services.

Unlike other subsidies, Head Start and Early Head Start funding is tied to specific performance standards and staff education levels to assure that services maintain a high level of quality. Head Start pioneered efforts to improve school readiness outcomes for children by focusing on social and cognitive development activities. Head Start and Early Head Start programs also go beyond many early learning programs by providing a full range of family support services.

Head Start serves an estimated three out of five eligible preschool children, while Early Head Start only serves approximately three percent of eligible infants and toddlers.



Range of quality of early learning programs, shown according to the percentage of our region's children\* enrolled in three different levels of program quality:

- Children enrolled in license-exempt programs, which meet some basic state and health and safety requirements
- Children enrolled in programs that meet basic state licensing standards
- Children enrolled in programs with quality standards and participate in quality improvement initiatives (Head Start, Accreditation, QRIS)

\*Based on an estimate of children enrolled in early learning programs in the nine-county Kansas City region.

# SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES

**Quality early learning programs provide strong family support** comprised of educating parents about child development issues and working with them throughout the early learning years. Studies show that children are better prepared for school when programs keep parents involved in their progress and program activities. Surveys conducted for the 2010 Status Report indicate that most early learning centers and family home providers in our region offer an array of supports and resources.

## Additional Supports

The Kansas City region's early learning system has made great gains in recent years to improve the quality of services and supports for low income children and families. However, many hurdles still lie ahead as we strive to prepare all children for success in school. Supporting families and encouraging parent involvement will be key to achieving this goal.

Increased investments are needed to ensure that all children have access to quality early learning programs that place a strong emphasis on the family. Training and development opportunities for early learning professionals must be expanded to ensure that families receive the best service delivery from well-trained staff. Providers should consider implementing additional supports for families to promote parent education and involvement.

## The Economy's Impact on Families

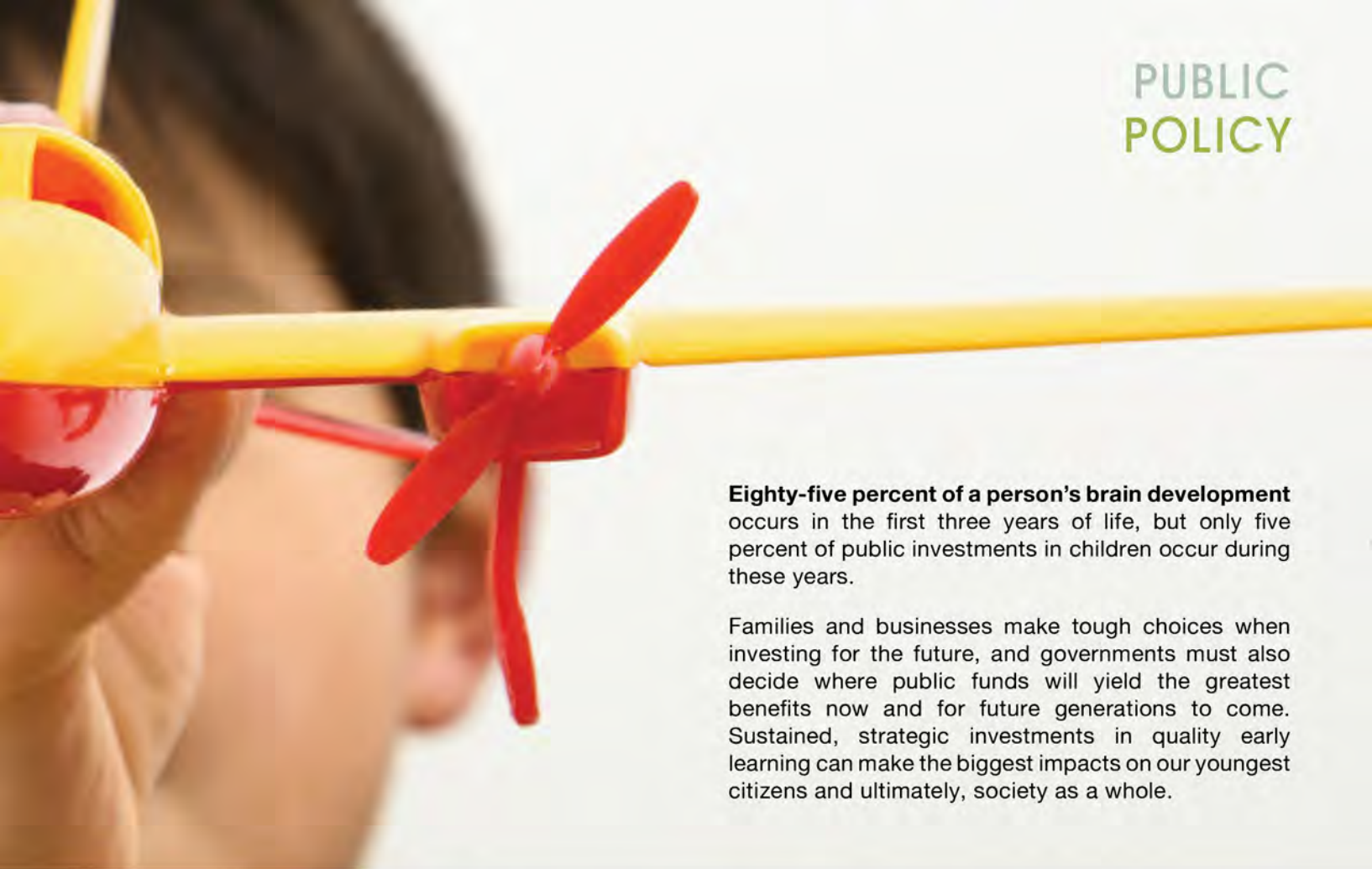
In a recent survey, 53 percent of center directors, and more than one-third of family home providers indicated that more families are requesting additional supports or referrals for services, due to the current economic recession.

## Family Perceptions of Needs

As part of its 2010 Community Assessment, Mid-America Head Start (MAHS) surveyed 100 community agencies to identify barriers that keep families from meeting their basic needs:

- Access to health care and dental services for women, especially the poor and working poor;
- Access to resources impacted by language issues, inaccessible locations and hours of services;
- Child care costs, which impair parents' job opportunities and increases the need for Head Start services;
- Education and transportation;
- Integration with school district health personnel and coordination of health services.





**Eighty-five percent of a person's brain development** occurs in the first three years of life, but only five percent of public investments in children occur during these years.

Families and businesses make tough choices when investing for the future, and governments must also decide where public funds will yield the greatest benefits now and for future generations to come. Sustained, strategic investments in quality early learning can make the biggest impacts on our youngest citizens and ultimately, society as a whole.

### Quality Early Learning and Quality of Life

Research shows that when at-risk children are placed in high-quality early learning programs, they are more likely to graduate from high school, attend college and earn higher wages as productive members of the workforce. They are also less likely to use drugs, receive welfare and commit crimes down the road.

Currently, more than 46,000 adults are behind bars in the state of Missouri. This means that 1-in-97 adults in the state are incarcerated at an annual cost in excess of \$16,000 each (approx. \$662 million total per year). Studies show that Missouri could save nearly \$160 million if it cut prison costs by 25 percent and reallocated those dollars to investments in quality early learning. **SOURCE: *Fight Crime: Invest in Kids (State Profiles)***

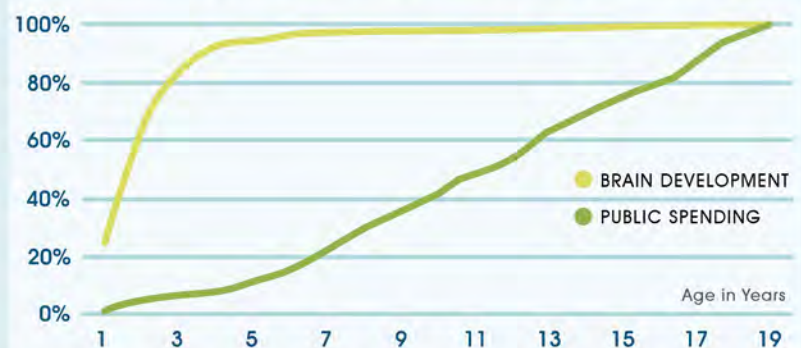
### Building Public Will

MCEL engages in several collaborative efforts targeting key audiences about the importance of increased public investments in quality early learning. In recent years, the momentum of this advocacy work has swelled as the need for change becomes more evident. MCEL is currently involved in public education initiatives designed to build public will for early learning from the ground-up.

### Missouri Coalition for School Readiness

One of MCEL's public engagement activities has been its work with a diverse group of early learning partners to establish the Missouri Coalition for School Readiness. MCEL recently secured funds from Pre-K Now, a project of the Pew Center on the States, to support the Coalition's work and develop consistent messaging focused on the educational and economic benefits of a voluntary statewide pre-k system.

### BRAIN DEVELOPMENT VS. PUBLIC SPENDING



The RAND Corporation produced this chart to compare brain development with public investments in education and other supports, between birth and young adulthood.

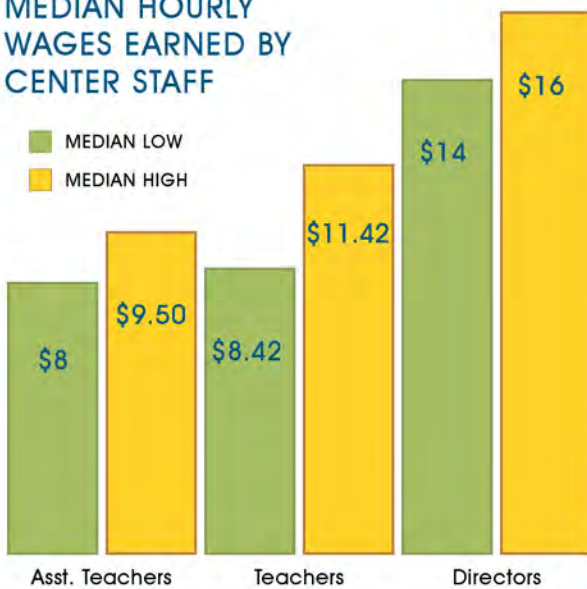
# WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Research shows that highly educated early learning professionals ensure better outcomes for children: they convey positive attitudes, are more likely to share knowledge about early childhood education and development with parents, and tend to create high quality learning environments.

Conversely, research shows that low educational qualifications and a lack of preparation in preschool limit the educational effectiveness of many teachers. Both formal education and intentional training are important for developing quality teachers.



## MEDIAN HOURLY WAGES EARNED BY CENTER STAFF



### Teacher Compensation and Turnover

Most early learning professionals earn near-poverty level wages, ranging from approximately \$17,500 to \$23,800 per year. Directors' wages ranged from \$29,000 to \$33,000 per year. Nearly 80 percent of family home providers earn less than \$25,000 per year.

In 2009, nearly one-quarter of center-based programs surveyed reported turnover rates in excess of 25 percent. In most cases, employees left to pursue higher paying jobs. Preschool teachers with equal credentials to their elementary school counterparts earn an average of 87 percent less; typically less than hair stylists and bus drivers.

### Education Levels of Early Learning Professionals

There is a growing shortage of qualified early childhood teachers with degrees or certification in early childhood development or related fields. The results of a national study (**SOURCE: *Losing Ground in Early Childhood Education*, Herzenberg, Price, and Bradley**) further acknowledged this growing "talent gap."

Local data collected in 2009 mirrors the national findings:

- Twenty-eight percent of center staff and 24 percent of family home providers only had high school educations.
- Twenty-seven percent of center staff and 17 percent of family home providers had degrees or certificates in early childhood development.
- Thirty-eight percent of center staff and more than half of all family home providers had no formal education in early childhood development.



**The Directors Credential** is a new recognition opportunity for early learning program directors in Missouri and Kansas. MCEL is working with credentialing agencies in both states to promote the new initiative to providers. Polly Prendergast (left), director of the Berkley Child and Family Development Center, received the region's first credential at the 2010 Quality Celebration, from Mike Abel, past-president of AEYC-MO.

# ON THE HORIZON

## Imagine what the region's early learning system could accomplish in the next twenty years:

- Communities that value and support high-quality early learning programs and parent education training for all families in the region;
- Increased region-wide access to home-based and community-based early learning programs that participate in formal quality improvement systems and/or meet recognized quality standards such as QRIS, Head Start or accreditation;
- Opportunities for families to enroll young children in high-quality Pre-K programs through partnerships with community-based early learning programs and public school districts;
- More professional development opportunities and supports for early learning teachers and program directors and increased recognition that children and programs benefit from highly skilled and knowledgeable early learning professionals;
- Access to more programs that support enhanced classroom experiences, such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), an initiative to improve curriculum fidelity and teacher-child interactions;
- Sustainable public funding mechanisms in place to improve access to quality early learning that will benefit the success and well-being of future generations of Kansas Citizens;
- **ALL young children are prepared to succeed in school, and in life, before they enter kindergarten.**

**MARC**

Mid-America Regional Council

600 Broadway, Suite 200, Kansas City, Missouri 64105-1659

tel 816/474-4240 | fax 816/421-7758 | web [www.marc.org](http://www.marc.org)

### Data Gathering Methodology

MCEL gathered data for this report through a regional survey of early learning programs in 2009. MCEL collected over 840 surveys from area licensed and registered family child care homes and over 390 surveys from area licensed and licensed exempt centers. Additional information was provided by The Family Conservancy and collected from state social service and child care licensing agencies, a literature review of national research and regional and national census and economic data.