



Guest Blog: DC Should Fund a Better Start for Struggling Young Children

By Renee Murphy, Senior Policy Attorney at Children's Law Center

[Children's Law Center](#) and allies like DCFPI are urging the DC Council to fully fund a key program to help hundreds, if not thousands, of children start school on par with their peers. The Council approved a plan two years ago to reach children before developmental delays get too severe, but it hasn't been put into effect yet due to lack of funding. Each additional year that the District waits leaves 1,200 children behind and pushes them into special education programs.

The [Strong Start/DC Early Intervention Program](#) helps children up to three years old who are struggling with development, like language and motor skills. The program provides early intervention services, therapies that teach parents and child care teachers so they can help children make progress by the time they start school.

The Mayor's proposed fiscal year 2017 budget adds some money to the program but it is not enough to keep up with the numbers of children who need early intervention services. Also, the Mayor's budget fails to fund an expansion of the program that was planned by the DC Council.

The DC Council should invest \$6.5 million to maintain and expand this program. These dollars will be a wise investment in our children and our schools.

First, it would allow the District to invest in children during the years when intervention can make a critical difference in their future. Birth to age three is a crucial time of [rapid brain](#) and body growth. In DC, too many babies and toddlers have unaddressed developmental delays and, as a result, start school behind.

The good news is that 46 percent of children who get early intervention services completely catch up and several years later they are still doing as well as peers, [according to national research](#). For other, more severely delayed or disabled children, getting help early [improves their expected skills](#). This is a truly effective way to start children strong.

Second, it saves money in the long run. Children who have unaddressed developmental delays will end up straining the special education system. That gives DC's schools a very challenging task, since children who do not receive the specialized support they need as infants and toddlers have a much harder time making up lost ground later. DC's [dismal academic gap for children in special education](#) – about four percent are on level – illustrates how hard it is to catch older children up in school.

Finally, the program already has the DC Council's stamp of approval. The DC Council and the Mayor made a good decision to expand program eligibility to infants and toddlers with a 25 percent

delay in one area of development (to replace a policy to wait for a 50 percent delay in one area or 25 percent in two areas) in the [Enhanced Special Education Services Act](#) of 2014. This is a step many other states have successfully taken with good results. The law requires the program expansion by July 2017, but this expansion needs to be funded.

The time is now for the DC Council to invest in the futures of our youngest children. Fully funding the Strong Start/DC Early Intervention Program and its expansion will help thousands of children have a better start.