

“Pour Resources In” and Watch Early Learners Grow

By Marlana Wallace

There’s excitement in the Wilson building these days about investing in DC’s future—our infants and toddlers—and not just because Councilmember Nadeau recently became a mom! The Council had a standing-room-only [hearing](#) last week for two bills that would improve access to high-quality early education for the children that need it most, and expand critical health services for their families. The bills are an important step toward creating a comprehensive approach to supporting early childhood development.

The two bills, championed by Councilmembers Vincent Gray and Councilmember Robert White, were co-introduced by nearly all councilmembers, with enthusiastic support like this from Councilmember Evans:



“How do we help [children]...so they don’t find themselves immediately behind in first grade and playing catch-up forever? ...Getting children into school at a year and a half or two makes all the difference in the world. We should be pouring our resources into making this happen instead of pouring them in at the other endWe’re not talking about baby-sitting, we’re talking about educating and there’s a difference.”

Dozens of child care directors, early learning educators, health care providers, parents, grandparents, and community advocates showed up to support the major thrust of the legislation, including over 15 members of the [Birth to Three Policy Alliance](#).

There are three strong, core components both bills share:

1) Fully Fund the Child Care Subsidy Program

The reimbursements DC gives to early learning centers to care for and educate low-income children are far too low. Child care providers struggle to make ends meet, teachers and other staff earn far less than they deserve, and low-income families are often turned away from community-based organizations that cannot afford to take more children with vouchers.

Both bills would identify the true cost of quality care, and take steps to fully fund reimbursements to providers. It’s a bold recognition that DC has a responsibility to fully support the education of low-income infants and toddlers, building on DC’s strong commitment to Pre-K for three- and four-year-olds. Figuring all this out may take a while, yet we know there’s a problem now. DC Council and the Mayor should make a notable down-payment in Fiscal Year 2019 with an increase of at least \$10 million.

2) Increase Pay & Support for Early Learning Educators

The professionals we rely on to lay the educational foundation for our children and future workforce are among the lowest paid, earning less than \$30,000 on average and rarely receiving health or retirement benefits. Without better compensation and benefits, teachers may leave community-based organizations for DC Public Schools, or leave the field entirely. Inadequate compensation often leads to high turnover, which interrupts the continuity of care for young children.

Both bills include deliberate strategies to raise pay for teachers. They build a fair, competitive teacher salary into the model DC uses to determine the costs of child care, with annual adjustments for rising cost of living. Higher compensation and more professional support will help early learning directors recruit and retain the qualified workforce DC needs. The fact that DC is now requiring early childhood teachers to seek higher education credentials is a further reason to increase salaries.

3) Prioritize Investments in the Highest Quality Care for Children with the Greatest Needs

DCFPI recommends the Council first prioritize funding for the child care subsidy program, for the children with the greatest needs, before addressing other issues like increasing the supply of child care for higher income families. This is not only a morally sound and equitable approach, it also reduces school readiness gaps and saves money over the course of each child's lifetime. The District can save \$6.30 for every \$1 invested in high quality care for low-income infants and toddlers.¹

If you are interested in a more detailed description of our policy positions on the bills, please read DCFPI's [complete testimony](#).

Read the complete text of Councilmember Gray's "[B22-0203 Infant and Toddler Developmental Health Services Act of 2017](#)" and Councilmember White's "[B22-0355 Bolstering Early Growth Investment Amendment Act of 2017 \(BEGIN Act\)](#)".

¹ Garcia et. Al, *Center for the Economics of Human Development*, "[The Life-cycle Benefits of an Influential Early Childhood Program](#)", December 2016.