

DCFPI Celebrates the Adoption of “Birth to Three For All DC”

By Marlana Wallace

The DC Council recently took groundbreaking steps to invest more in early childhood development, with the adoption of “[Birth to Three For All DC](#)” legislation last month. Every child deserves a strong start and a high-quality education, beginning at birth. The District has made important investments towards this end, but still falls far short of meeting the need, particularly for our youngest children in low-income families. Underinvestment in early childhood education contributes to serious racial and economic inequities in DC.

The comprehensive approach of the “Birth to Three” legislation builds on the success of DC’s universal pre-K3 and pre-K4 expansion over the past decade, by focusing on better serving our infants and toddlers before they get to pre-school. The legislation fully funds DC’s child care subsidy program, calls for competitive compensation for early educators, and improves access to health services and supports for families. The DC Council also secured partial funding for the legislation in the fiscal year (FY) 2019 budget, committing \$1.3 million to seed key components.

Fully implementing these important reforms will take many years and much more money. It is imperative that the District raise the revenue needed to fully fund this comprehensive vision in the years to come. These investments will not only benefit our youngest learners and the adults who care for them — they will also strengthen our entire city.

Early Childhood Education

Birth to three are critical years of social, emotional and cognitive development that ready children for school and beyond. But child care providers who educate children in low-income families are not paid enough to fully cover the costs of providing the level of high-quality early care and education that children deserve. Early educators in DC’s community-based organizations, who care for most infants and toddlers in the District, earn an average salary of only \$29,000 — far less than they should earn and far less than their peers in DC Public Schools or public charter preschools.¹ Moreover, the current number of high-quality early education slots is too low compared to the number of children who need them.

“Birth to Three For All DC” improves school readiness and supports for strong educators by:

- 1) Identifying the true cost of high-quality early education for infants and toddlers in the subsidy program, and ensuring child care subsidy payments rise to cover those costs in the next few years
- 2) Developing a fair, competitive salary scale for early childhood educators that is on par with their peers in DC public schools, and offering more support for teachers to attain higher credentials
- 3) Providing the resources through the Quality Improvement Network (QIN) to ensure that the education of children in low-income families meets the highest quality standards (Early Head Start) in Ward 7 and 8 by 2023, and citywide by 2025

Early Childhood and Family Health

Mental health, physical health and nutritional health supports are as important to early learning for infants and toddlers as classroom instruction. The healthy development of children can be supported in a variety of ways, such as ensuring staff in child care centers receive appropriate training to recognize and respond to childhood trauma, giving pediatricians resources to connect new parents with supports that provide family stability, and helping new moms breastfeed their children.

The District has some tools to support these needs, but it underinvests in these services and more is needed. As part of DC's Healthy Futures program, licensed mental health professionals provide on-site mental health consultation to early childhood educators in order to build the teacher's capacity to reduce challenging behaviors, promote the positive social emotional development, and support families. The HealthySteps program embeds a child development expert within the pediatric primary care setting to assist families during well-child visits. Both Healthy Futures and HealthySteps do not reach all the families that would benefit from these programs. New mothers may also need support from lactation consultants, but lactation consultants are not always available or well-supported themselves.

“Birth to Three For All DC” advances healthy child development by:

- 1) Expanding the number of child development centers participating in Healthy Futures and other evidence-based programs to provide behavioral health care services in all child development centers
- 2) Investing local funds to expand and sustain the HealthySteps model, which connects families with wrap-around services during pediatric visits
- 3) Establishing a Lactation Certification Preparatory Program to provide instruction, assistance, and mentorship to individuals pursuing a career in lactation consulting

Parenting and Family Supports

Families of young children in the District navigate complex systems and overwhelming transition periods, including pregnancy, child birth, social isolation, housing changes, developmental delays, and transitions into center-based programs and schooling. Many families need help understanding and supporting their child's development and may not know how to find the resources they need. Existing home visiting services do not reach all of the families who could most benefit from them, and the District's local investment in home visiting is too low to adequately support the programs and their workforce. Too many DC families also struggle to afford child care, especially low and middle-income families. Center-based care for an infant costs DC families an average of \$23,000 a year.² A single mother of two making just over \$63,000 does not qualify for child care subsidies, but quality care still takes up an enormous share of her income. According to national studies and proposals, families should pay no more than 10 percent of their income in child care expenses.³ Yet giving all families free child care, regardless of income, would be extremely costly and would jeopardize other vital supports low-income families and their children need to thrive.

“Birth to Three For All DC” supports parents and families by:

- 1) Improving and expanding home visiting programs, a proven strategy to help connect families to essential supports, promote improved health care utilization, and achieve the best possible outcomes
- 2) Investing in Help Me Grow, a phone-based, care coordination system to help families navigate the District's support services, and maintain centralized records of developmental screenings and data
- 3) Making child care more affordable for all families in a progressive way by setting child care co-payments for all parents that rise with one's income, such that no family spends more than 10 percent of their income on child care

Funding For Next Year and the Future

The DC Council secured funding to seed key components of the legislation in the city’s 2019 budget, committing \$1.3 million. These include the development of the salary scale for early educators, expansion of the Healthy Steps pediatric model, additional home visiting services, and on-site classes for early educators earning higher credentials.

The partial funding and enactment of this legislation underscores the importance of this legislation and signals vital momentum. But far more funding is needed to implement the full bill, rising to about \$500 million ten years from now.⁴ This is a substantial amount, but the District has shown before that it can make these kinds of important investments in children. We can look to the successful implementation of universal pre-K as a powerful example of what’s possible. That investment in early education costs the District roughly \$200 million a year, and it began with “[The Pre-K Enhancement and Expansion Act of 2008](#)”.⁵ Universal pre-K has helped thousands of DC families give their children a strong start, and established the District as a national leader in early education. From a racial equity, gender equity, educational equity and anti-poverty perspective, we must improve both the quality and affordability of early childhood education. “Birth to Three For All DC” will brighten the future of our city by ensuring we no longer underinvest in these critical years of social, emotional and cognitive development.

[Read more](#) about why the Birth-to-Three Policy Alliance, of which DCFPI is a member, supports this legislation and why we [celebrated](#) its enactment!

TABLE 1.

Fiscal Year 2019 Funding for Key Provisions of “Birth to Three For All DC”

	Dollars
Home visiting programs	\$710,566
HealthySteps	\$300,000
Onsite Classes for teachers earning higher degrees	\$185,335
Salary scale and other studies	\$100,183
Total	\$1,296,084

Source: Fiscal Year 2019 Budget

¹ Child Care Aware, “[2017 State Child Care Facts in the District of Columbia](#)”

² Economic Policy Institute, “[The Cost of Child Care in Washington DC](#)”

³ National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, Medicine, “[Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education](#)”,

⁴ Estimated using the figures in the latest [Fiscal Impact Statement](#), and adjusted for inflation over ten years.

⁵ Estimated using budgeted funds for pre-K students in DCPS and public charter schools in the Uniform Per Student Funding Formula budget for fiscal year 2016.