

## **Child Care: Essential for COVID Recovery in Flagstaff**

The pandemic has left a lasting impact on children, families and communities across the world. Economic conditions and family stability continue to remain unstable, as many parents and caregivers have not returned to the workforce. Prior to the pandemic, 32% of employers saw employees leave the workforce due to a lack of child care (Ready Nation, 2019). The issue is only further exacerbated post-COVID, with a lack of accessible and affordable child care options.

With our unique characteristics, Flagstaff is feeling this same impact in many ways. We continue to have struggles with livable conditions, specifically for families in our community. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services advises that child care should not amount to more than 10% of a household's budget. In Flagstaff, this cost is at 16% making it well above the national recommendation. Too often, family members are choosing not to work due to the costs of child care, or, in worst-case scenarios, are sending their children to unsafe child care options. Accessibility to existing child care spots still remains a challenge. Prior to the pandemic, there were two and a half children for every seat available for three- and four-year-old children. This ratio has now worsened, as 105 additional seats were eliminated due to child care closures in Flagstaff.

As demonstrated in previous city council meetings, evidence shows that increasing child care assistance and access can increase earnings and employment, allowing families to move out of poverty. Furthermore, children who attend high quality child care or early childhood education programs reap benefits in achieving higher high school and post-secondary graduation rates, lower incarceration rates, and are more likely to be homeowners (Arizona Early Childhood Alliance, 2018). Finally, investing in high quality child care has one of the highest returns on investments in human capital at a rate of 1 to 16 (James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economics). Overall, this investment can create better education, health, social, and economic outcomes for the community.

Flagstaff families and businesses are eager to move forward after more than a year of uncertainty, but important factors like child care accessibility will have a significant effect on workforce recovery.

Now is the time to act to increase access, affordability, and quality for child care programs. With support from the American Rescue Act funds, we propose the following plan to get families back to work and children back to high quality programs:

- 1) Close the gap in available care for four-year-old children by immediately opening two additional Elevate PreK pilot classrooms by building on the current investment. Elevate PreK classrooms serve low to middle income families who are not currently enrolled in preschool services. Funding for these classrooms is provided by a blend of public and private investments to ensure that community resources are being leveraged to the fullest capacity.
- 2) Incorporate the use of the donated Elevate PreK Resource Finder to easily and efficiently connect families to child care assistance, available programs and wrap-around services. The Elevate PreK Resource Finder provides both online and relationship-based navigation to connect families to child care supports and services that promote family stability in Flagstaff.
- 3) Provide before-and after-care options for working families who are utilizing Head Start services. This could include leveraging existing transportation services and child care sites to bridge the gap for families needing full-day, year-round care.

- 4) Complete a feasibility study in partnership with the city over the three-year pilot that identifies next steps towards a sustainable funding path for a unified early childhood system. We will commit to securing private philanthropic supports to assist in creating recommendations for the current investments. This would include identified supports for existing programs and pilot programs that are currently filling the gap in services.

When we invest in Flagstaff's families and children, we support all sectors of the community in achieving a stronger community and supported residents.

With thanks,



Rebecca Cirzan

Northern Arizona Regional Lead and Elevate PreK Coordinator

Association for Supportive Child Care

Resources:

<https://azeca.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/AZECA-Early-Childhood-is-Important.pdf>

<https://heckmanequation.org/resource/invest-in-early-childhood-development-reduce-deficits-strengthen-the-economy/>

<https://strongnation.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/602/83bb2275-ce07-4d74-bcee-ff6178daf6bd.pdf?1547054862&inline;%20filename=%22Want%20to%20Grow%20the%20Economy?%20Fix%20the%20Child%20Care%20Crisis.pdf%22>