

The childcare crisis continues to have a significant impact on economic output, labor force participation, career advancement and job training, and workplace productivity. A lack of childcare stability has led to a \$1.7 billion loss annually to Arizona's economy (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2022). In Coconino County, there are 5,183 children with all parents in the labor force; however, there are only 3,147 center-based childcare slots (First Things First, 2024). The region is considered a childcare desert for infants and toddlers, meaning there are three spots for every child birth to two. There are almost eight times the number of infants compared to childcare slots in the region. Aside from access, the lack of affordability presents challenges for low- to middle-class families. Sending an infant to a licensed center in Coconino County is about 15% of a family's income, far above the US Department of Health and Human Services recommended affordability of 7%. Higher quality childcare costs more to operate, with the costs falling on the backs of families. With the rising cost of living, it becomes nearly impossible to afford and access high-quality care and remain in the workforce. Arizona families are losing \$3 billion per year in forgone earnings and expenses related to job searches (ReadyNation 2023).

Research shows that access to affordable, high-quality early childhood programs do the following:

- 1) Supports children in developing pre-workforce skills such as social and academic readiness, increasing high school graduation rates
- 2) Allows families to engage or continue engaging in education or the workforce, making them less likely to turn to public assistance
- 3) Increases employee engagement and business productivity with increased wages/profits
- 4) Decrease in crime and poverty for communities, building a more attractive place to live

Northern Arizona University's Early Learning and Development Center (ELDC) is an innovative early childhood lab school serving children, families, educators, and employers. Our unique model provides outcomes for the following goals:

- 1) We provide financial assistance for student-parents so that they are fully able to engage in their education pursuits.
- 2) We serve employees of NAU, allowing them to bring their child to their place of work.
- 3) We provide the highest quality of care, having teachers with both bachelor's and master's degrees, modeling exemplary practices based in research and culturally responsive practices.
- 4) We recruit and train the future early childhood workforce by offering part-time jobs, practicum, volunteer, student-teacher, and intern placements.
- 5) We host workshops and professional development for preservice and in-service educators in conjunction with early childhood faculty and experienced educators in the field.

We are currently at capacity, with a waitlist of student-parents, NAU employees and community members. Knowing that there is a dire need for additional infant and toddler care, the ELDC has set a goal to expand its services. To do this, the facility would need approximately \$1.7 million dollars to add two additional classrooms, an education and community center, and a lab space for

specialized early childhood programming such as screenings and interventions. This would increase our workforce and workforce pipeline, while also making the ELDC eligible for additional grants and funding. We ask that regional partners, including the City of Flagstaff, consider our request, knowing that we can provide sustaining opportunities to our community with this expansion.

We look forward to hearing your perspectives and are excited to share more information about the childcare crisis and our work at the ELDC.

With gratitude

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