Introduction

There is a growing body of developmental brain science research that underscores the urgent need for investment in high quality early care and education experiences for young children, particularly those from low-income families.

The brain develops at an unprecedented rate during the first five years of life, with 700 new neural connections formed every second. This rapid growth of neurons hardwires the brain architecture for early sensory development, language skills, and more complex cognitive functioning.

The process of early brain development may be enriched or impeded by environmental influences. Disruptions to this critical growth period—such as chronic stress caused by poverty or maltreatment, produce gaps in social-emotional, behavioral, physical and cognitive development that prove difficult and costly to bridge as children progress in age and schooling.

Children Living in Poverty Face Greater Risks

Currently in New Mexico, 32% of children live in poverty, placing them at risk for food and housing insecurity, as well as exposure to maternal depression, and other environmental risk factors including family violence or substance abuse.

Providing access to high quality early care and learning experiences to low-income families and their children serves as a key social protective factor, education intervention, and a strategic investment of public funds.

Brain scientists have identified a set of core cognitive skills, referred to broadly as Executive Function, that are essential to healthy growth and development through childhood and into adulthood. Executive Function skills include the ability to hold working knowledge in short-term memory, exercise focus and flexibility in switching between various tasks, and self-regulate behavior and responses to stimuli. These competencies are essential to adapting successfully to classroom learning environments and maintaining follow-through in completing school or work assignments.

Research has shown that optimal development of Executive Function skills is driven by positive, healthy relationships with parents and other caregivers, as well as safe, healthy, and stable environments in which to learn, play and grow. High quality early care and learning settings are essential resources for providing low-income children and their families with access to these relationships and environments.

Early Language Development

The early years are also a critical window for the development of early language skills that predict academic performance in reading comprehension after children enter school. Again, family income status remains an integral factor in this developmental area as well. Hart and Risley’s 1995 study demonstrated that young children develop stronger early language skills based on
the frequency and quality of the words they hear from birth until age three.

Children in low-income families hear, on average, 3 million fewer words than their counterparts in working-class and professional families. Now, new research builds on these findings to show that the language gap emerges even earlier in life, beginning in infancy as young as 18 months. The policy implication to be drawn from this research is that kindergarten is simply too late to focus on early language and literacy development, particularly for low-income children.

Interventions must begin earlier in the form of high quality care and learning environments that offer the caring, positive relationships that build the exchange of oral language.

**Policy Recommendations**

Studies have shown that family income is the strongest predictor of success in school and later in life. What is clear about the research is that quality child care is critical for healthy child development. Trained and educated staff who understand how to spur higher level thinking, encourage and promote language development, and engage children in a positive manner are the cornerstone to quality settings.

New Mexico’s Children, Youth and Families Department (CYFD) can support quality child care by:

- Supporting provider payment rates at the 75th percentile of market rates or higher.
- Expanding T.E.A.C.H. and other professional development initiatives designed to strengthen the child care workforce; and
- Supporting an expansion of the Santa Fe INCENTIVES pilot to provide income supplements to child care providers as they obtain higher levels of education and training.

High quality early care and learning programs that provide low-income children access to the enriching, safe, and stable relationships and environments that are foundational to positive lifelong health, wellness, and educational outcomes can make a lifelong difference.

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4. Ibid.