What helps American Mothers Stay at Work? Reducing Childcare Costs, Increasing Head Start Enrollment and Lengthening School Days – Evidence from Key States

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Childcare costs and accessibility remain barriers to women's full labor force participation

Since the 1970s, American women have moved into higher education and the workforce *en masse*. Yet, unequal responsibilities for child-rearing and lack of access to affordable childcare remain barriers to women's full employment.ⁱ As childcare costs increase, mothers are more likely to leave the labor force, leaving them financially dependent on their partners or family and vulnerable to poverty.ⁱⁱ Our research shows that childcare cost and quality, Head Start enrollment rates and school day length are important policy avenues to support working mothers.ⁱⁱⁱ

Programs implemented in three states stand out as providing support for working mothers: Nebraska, North Dakota, and the District of Columbia.

- Nebraska provides inexpensive high-quality childcare^{iv} and longer school days.^v
- Washington, D.C. provides universal access to preschool for three- and four-year olds^{vi}.
- North Dakota provides expansive Head Start enrollment^{vii}.

Nebraska: Inexpensive Childcare and Long School Days

Nebraska is notable in our studies for offering parents inexpensive and high-quality childcare. Many mothers return to work quickly following childbirth, putting infants and toddlers into

childcare. Nebraska also has some of the longest school days in the nation and widely available afterschool care programs^{viii}.

Nebraska has implemented the Step up to Quality program through the Nebraska Department of Education that is a quality rating and improvement program that is open to all providers: home/family based, public school based, Head Start programs and childcare centers. The program supports licensed childcare providers to improve quality across seven metrics: curriculum, learning environments, teacher-child interactions, child outcomes, professional development rating, family engagement and partnership and program administration. Childcare programs can choose to be evaluated for quality across any of these seven metrics with points allocated in each to indicate childcare quality. Nebraska's childcare policies are notable in their inclusiveness and flexibility. Nebraska also has some of the lowest poverty rates for married couples in the nation.

Washington, D.C.: Universal Preschool Coverage

Washington, D.C. provides a model for preschool policies. Like comparable cities, fee-based childcare in the area remains expensive. Yet, the District of Columbia leads the nation in expanding access to pre-school programs. Roughly 70% of all eligible three and four year-olds are now enrolled in state-supported pre-school.

Universal preschool has benefited children from disadvantaged families the most, offering expanded access to developmental programs and

improving school readiness. It also significantly boosted the employment and earnings of mothers in Washington, D.C. Since the universal preschool program was enacted, mothers' labor force participation increased by 12 percentage points, with 10 percentage points attributable to the expanded access of universal preschool.^{ix}

North Dakota: Head Start Enrollment

North Dakota has the highest rate of Head Start enrollment in the nation. Among those eligible, 97% of three year-olds and 100% of four year-olds are enrolled in the program and many higher income families are on waitlists for Head Start programs given their high quality.^x North Dakota's Head Start programs are notable for their two-generation approach whereby they target their marketing to the parents, to clarify the benefits of a high quality preschool experience for children's long-term outcomes. North Dakota's Head Start programs are well-connected to the local community and is embedded within other federal programs (WIC and Department of Workforce Services). Through these partnerships, Head Start and the Childcare Assistance Program are included in parents' support plans to encourage employment. North Dakota's Head Start program is notable for its strong alliances with the community and existing government support services.

Expanding childcare resources increases maternal employment

Our research shows:

1. States tend to cluster in offering childcare resources – states like Nebraska, Iowa, North and South Dakota –provide inexpensive childcare, long school days, expansive afterschool care, and high enrollment in Head Start programs
 - a. These states tend to have higher purchasing power, more female-dominated employment and a

higher concentration of childcare workers relative to the national average (location quotient)

- b. Married mothers in these states are more likely to be employed – full-time and part-time – especially when children are young

2. Head Start enrollment helps high-school educated mothers maintain employment when faced with expensive childcare costs
 - a. The cost of childcare is especially burdensome for mothers with a high-school diploma or less who tend to cluster in low-paid, service jobs and may be priced out of care
 - b. The cost of childcare is mitigated, in part, by states with high Head Start enrollment and childcare subsidies

Key policy recommendations (for state and/or Federal U.S. governments):

1. Legislate guaranteed spaces in universal, high quality, low-cost childcare
2. Lengthen school days
3. Expand after-school care
4. Maximize spaces for Head Start enrollment

ⁱ Jill E. Yavorsky, Claire M. Kamp Dush, and Sarah J. Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015. "The Production of Inequality: The Gender Division of Labor Across the Transition to Parenthood." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77(3): 662–679; Katharine B. Stevens, 2017. *Workforce of Today, Workforce of Tomorrow: The Business Case for High-Quality Child Care*. U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation.

https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/sites/default/files/Workforce%20of%20Today%2CWorkforce%20of%20Tomorrow%20Report_0.pdf

ⁱⁱ Michael Madowitz, Alex Rowell, and Katie Hamm, 2016. *Calculating the Hidden Cost of Interrupting a Career for Child Care*. Center for American Progress.

<https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/17091517/ChildCareCalculator-methodology.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Liana Christin Landivar and Leah Ruppanner, 2019. Across State Lines: Mobility, Women's Employment, and State-Level Childcare and Gender Empowerment. Presented at the Population Association of American annual conference.

<http://paa2019.populationassociation.org/uploads/192283>

^{iv} Data averaged across 2011-2015 years from the Childcare Aware State Factsheets <http://usa.childcareaware.org/advocacy-public-policy/resources/research/statefactsheets/>

^v Data averaged across 2011-2015 years from the Educational Commission of the Instructional Time Policies

<https://www.ecs.org/instructional-time-policies-state-profiles/>

^{vi} National Institute for Early Education Research, <http://nieer.org/2016/01/06/universal-pre-k-what-does-it-mean-and-who-provides-it> <http://nieer.org/state-preschool-yearbooks>

^{vii} National Institute for Early Education Research, State(s) of Head Start <http://nieer.org/headstart>

^{viii} Ruppanner, Leah. *The State of Mother's Welfare: Why Maternal Employment Varies across States*. Temple University Press.

^{ix} Rasheed Malik, 2018. *The Effects of Universal Preschool in Washington, D.C.* Center for American Progress.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2018/09/26/458208/effects-universal-preschool-washington-d-c/>

^x Barnett, Seven W. and Allison H. Friedman-Krauss. 2016. *State(s) of Head Start*. The National Institute for Early Education Research. http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/HS_Full_Reduced.pdf