

A STUDY OF  
**The Massachusetts Child  
Care Voucher System**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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## Massachusetts Makes a Promise to Children

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, home of the first public schools in America, faces another leadership opportunity: the chance to offer early education to all of its young residents. There is a growing consensus among key education and business leaders that investing in high-quality, universal prekindergarten programs would be significant and wise. A series of longitudinal studies have shown that early education provides a strong foundation for the development of human capital as well as for economic growth. Early education not only promotes “school readiness”; it also prepares children for greater financial and personal success in their adult lives. Unquestionably, “early education for all” is an idea whose time has come.

Toward this vision, in July 2004 the Massachusetts State Legislature unanimously passed, and Governor Mitt Romney signed, a law creating a Board and consolidated Department of Early Education and Care to administer the state’s early education and care system. An Act Establishing Early Education for All (EEA) was filed during the 2005-2006 Massachusetts legislative session with extraordinary bipartisan support. One hundred thirty-two state senators and representatives, representing two-thirds of the Legislature, cosponsored the bill which lays out the essential elements of a universally accessible, high-quality early education program, and calls for a special commission on full-day kindergarten. The proposal further states that there shall be a phase-in plan for EEA to be fully implemented no later than the 2012 school year and that the EEA will give priority to children in “low-wealth” communities as defined by the percentage of children in the school district who qualify for free and reduced lunch. The Board of Early Education and Care is to develop a funding methodology to enable programs receiving EEA funding to do so in combination with parent fees and/or local, state, or federal subsidies in order to offer full- and part-time program options depending on a child’s or family’s needs. Clearly, EEA offers an extraordinary promise to the young children of Massachusetts.

Significant financial resources will be required to achieve the vision of quality early education that is to be available for young children in Massachusetts. These financial resources are needed to lower the burden of early education and care (EEC) costs for families and to help support the needs of the early education workforce. In our current system of “private pay” for most families and “child care vouchers” for the poor, the cost of early education and care challenges many family budgets, affecting both parents’ ability to work and the quality of the program that is purchased. An early education and care program in Massachusetts typically costs on average \$11,000 per year for an infant, \$9,800 for a toddler, and \$7,650 for a preschool-aged child. Parents pay the bulk of these costs. In addition, the demand for funding supports for low-income parents in the form of vouchers and child care subsidies far exceeds the supply. In 2001, roughly 170,000 children were eligible for early education and care subsidies under various Massachusetts programs, but only about 69,000 subsidies were actually available. In 2004, 51,799 children received vouchers.

### *How will Massachusetts pay for the promise it has made to the children?*

Financial resources that Massachusetts appropriated for EEC increased substantially from FY92 to FY01. However, these appropriations decline faster than the overall budget in bad economic times. Federal funding used for EEC grew from \$70 million in the mid-1990s to \$367 million in FY01 as a result of the passage of the federal Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG), including \$259 million in FY01 that the state had the discretion to use for EEC or for other purposes. However, the portion of the EEC appropriations that were from state-generated funds dropped from 76 percent in FY96 to 28 percent in FY01. While there is an abundance of ideas, a comprehensive solution to increase resources for early education has yet to be enacted.



Ranking among the top tier of states in measures of child well-being, Massachusetts has historically been viewed as a place of educational innovation. Still, the advantages available to some children in the Commonwealth are not available to all. Poverty

*“No Child Is Born With Its Teeth.”*

(African Proverb)

rates, for example, vary dramatically by race (one in every 12 white children is poor compared to one in two Latino children and one in three African American children). The immediate and long-term impact of growing up in low-income families is well documented. These children tend to have more difficult school experiences. The social costs are also high: Every year a child spends growing up in

poverty has an estimated cost of \$11,800 in lost future productivity over his/her working life. Still, Massachusetts spends 4.4 times more per prisoner than per public school pupil.

Quality preschool is seen as a tool to address disparities among socioeconomic groups and is viewed as integral to school reform. The absence of significant public investments in the education of young children has a disproportionate impact on children of color because they are more likely to be poor. Influencing public policy is a priority strategy to facilitate equity and justice for these children.

Yet, regardless of family income, “no child is born with its teeth,” as a Ghanaian proverb reminds us. Our complex economy demands that all children be adequately prepared to succeed.

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*“The message is clear. Deliberate strategies to promote family economic security and reduce child poverty could provide tools of unexpected power to improve educational outcomes for young children.”*

Jane Knitzer

National Center for Children in Poverty | October 2002 Newsletter

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## **The Foundation of School Readiness is Economic Security Poverty Punctures the Promise**

While the universal need for school readiness is absolutely clear, there remains an undeniable reality: In measures of school readiness, more affluent children do better. Worse, poverty in early childhood, particularly persistent or extreme poverty, has more serious consequences for children than poverty at older ages, especially for cognitive development.

*“...income buys access...quality, services”*

National Center for Children in Poverty

More affluent children are two to three times more likely to be enrolled in formal settings. And, even when low-income children are in formal settings, the quality is poorer. Indeed, some scholars have questioned whether the emphasis on reducing educational disparities through educational reform is “out of balance” with recognition of the role of family economic security factors. The children most likely to be “unready” for school are the approximately 40 percent of children who are growing up in families living at or below 200 percent of the poverty level.



## Four Perspectives on the Promise: Partially Concealed Vision and Powerfully Common Themes

Over the past several years, Massachusetts and other states have fully implemented a voucher system for low-income families seeking child care. While Massachusetts historically funded child care for low-income families predominantly through direct contracts with providers, this shift towards the voucher system was expected to support parental choice about where their children would receive care. There are currently several types of vouchers in Massachusetts: Mothers may receive vouchers either through the welfare-to-work programs or based on income eligibility or other factors such as being a teen parent. This strategy of demand subsidy theoretically increases families' purchasing power and also the quality of care, as providers must compete for parent use.

While the voucher model of providing child care benefits has been promoted widely over the past several years, few efforts have been made to document the costs of this system to children, families, and the providers of care, as well as to the public. To date, the information surrounding the intended and unintended impacts of current public child care policies on children and on the system of care is fragmented and anecdotal. A well-documented, structured effort is needed if these dollars might possibly hope to become part of a funding strategy for Massachusetts' anticipated universal, high-quality system of early education that has been promised to children.

Under the auspices of the Bessie Tartt Wilson Children's Foundation, a team of researchers, all of whom are Massachusetts residents, conducted a study over a twelve-month period to evaluate the current voucher system, with specific focus on the welfare vouchers and the challenges in implementing this system. The Department of Early Education and Care provided the study with a list of all centers' infants, toddlers, or preschoolers receiving vouchers in 2004. From this list, the study identified 272 centers that were located in cities and towns within 12 miles of Boston, including

Boston. These included cities and towns in the Department of Early Education and Care Regions 3 (Northeast Massachusetts), 4 (MetroWest), and 6 (MetroBoston). The study then drew a random sample that was proportional to the voucher market share of each center – the probability that a specific center would be selected into the sample was proportional to the number of children they had who were receiving vouchers. By drawing a sample proportional to the number of vouchers, the study ensured including more of the larger voucher providers, while still drawing a sample that included larger and smaller centers. The Department of Early Education and Care also provided the study with a database of all providers with one or more voucher children during the January-March 2005 period. This database included information on the capacity of the home, but did not include the number of voucher children; therefore, the study did not draw a sample proportional to the number of vouchers a particular home received. The study drew a random sample of family child care providers living within 12 miles of Boston, including Boston.

The study documents the flow of over 3,295 vouchers for children and families entering the child care system in Massachusetts through these vouchers. In addition to "tracking" the vouchers, the study conducted surveys with 225 families, 88 research and referral (R&R) agency staff, and seven child care center directors. In-depth interviews were conducted with 48 mothers, five child care center directors, 19 family day care providers, and nine R&R staff. In addition to these strategies, the Foundation convened a "Providers Forum" in which 350 professionals joined in dialogue with the Massachusetts Office of Child Care Services (OCCS) and Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) staff, as well as with each other, to discuss the child care voucher system. Through this research, the study addressed the following questions:

- What is Massachusetts trying to accomplish with the child care voucher system?



- What are the intended and unintended impacts of this system?
- How can Massachusetts design a system that will achieve only the positive, intended outcomes?

This study benefits from having the perspectives of four key players in the system: families, family child care providers, child care centers, and resource and referral agencies. Analysis of their perspectives revealed powerful common themes including that vouchers are indeed an important source of support for families and children.

Virtually all families recognize the value of the voucher program, but they had problems negotiating the system. Many were able to manage it, though not necessarily efficiently or most effectively. Many required tremendous support from informal networks, such as their providers, to handle the demands of the system. And, although researchers in this study encountered families who “gave up” on the system altogether, we cannot account for families who simply could not negotiate the system at all.

The current voucher system raises concern about its impact on children and the quality of their education and care.

- Although Massachusetts policy allows for six-month vouchers, we found that most children were subject to discontinuous, unstable care. Nearly two-thirds of the 3,295 vouchers studied were issued for less than six months.

*“There is really minimal parent choice, the low rates don’t allow for real choice.”*

R&R Agency Staff

- Reimbursement rates for providers are universally regarded as too low, unintentionally restricting parent choice, unjustifiably forcing providers to subsidize the system, and leading to serious questions about whether they indeed jeopardize the quality of care that children actually receive.

*“It is hard to make ends meet personally and professionally.”* A Center Director

*“It is hard to run a business on a month-to-month basis.”* A Center Director

- Typically, voucher administration at centers requires 38 percent of a full-time staff person, or two days a week.

*“I spend up to 12 hours many weeks on administrative issues related to vouchers. This is simply to clear up communication, make certain that all invoices are timely, and to follow up on renewals and terminations.”*

A Center Director

*“It is too hard... I have to spend too much time on the phone, running to the R&R, writing letters, working with my staff, reorganizing shifts and hours.”* A Center Director

- Children attending the centers in the study were absent a total of 1,730 days because they had no voucher – the equivalent of 2.5 days/year per child. (This number does not include children whose vouchers were terminated.)

*“[If the voucher is terminated] the children get bounced around from family member to family member, whoever can do it that day.”*

A Family Child Care Provider

*“They make a friend, then they have to stay home, then it is hard to come back and their friend has another friend.”*

A Family Child Care Provider

- Centers in the Voucher Study lost revenues for an average of 30 days a year providing free care for children, and an additional 136 days a year when centers were unable to fill slots of children whose vouchers were terminated.

*“I don’t know how I can afford to stay in a field with no raise for 10 years. I have given my life to this work. We are turning into a heartless society when we cannot provide care for our neediest children. The cost of care is on the backs of providers. Providers are the working poor.”* A Center Director

*“Sometimes for months I don’t get the co-pay. I never turn down a parent. I let them come for free.”* A Family Child Care Provider



- Many families experience the system as burdensome, confusing, and penalizing, further complicating their difficult and complex lives. From all four perspectives, the documentation required of families is considered to be excessive; worse, such documentation is usually required twice in the certification process. Parents commented on being treated uncivilly, about employers not sympathetic to their needs, and about having to wait to get appointments with the R&R.

*“I had to beg my boss for the afternoon off. I came to the voucher office. They are so rude to me. No one speaks Spanish. They always yell at me. I can hear; I just cannot speak English.”* A Parent

*“I don’t understand the rules of this system.”* A Parent

*“I think I would have been fired if I had asked for one more day off, so I let my voucher be terminated.”* A Parent

*“After families enter the system, when their DTA case closes, they get a letter that is very scary to them. The transition process is not great.”* R&R Agency Staff

- Resource and referral agencies are caught in the middle between enforcing the regulations and meeting the families’ needs, undermining their efforts to be a “resource” to families relative to serving as “voucher police.”

*“There is not enough time to do all we want to do or all the state expects us to do....”* Agency A

*“Everything that they do not fund, including education, support services, and trainings.... R&R delivers without the funding. [We] would like to be able to give more in-depth services to parents and providers. Business practices for the providers, education for the parents, especially families with special needs children. Helping families become self-sufficient. I have a deep passion to give more direct support to families who need it.”* Agency C

*“What we want it to be is not what it is now. We want to be able to really counsel families and give them resources.”* Agency B

*“They have to wait two, three, or even four weeks at [a specific R&R].”*  
A Family Child Care Provider

*“I went for renewal. It takes me two hours to get to the R&R office. I wait for 45 minutes. She says I do not have the right papers. I have to go home. If I go home and come back, it will take me four hours on the bus and they will be closed. I will have to take another day from work. I will lose the voucher. I cannot come again. This is too much. These people do not care.”* A Parent

*“Try to see it through their eyes. We are not the fraud police.”* R&R Agency Staff

*“The policies are very grey and the timing doesn’t always work.”* R&R Agency Staff

*“The system is not good for families who do not speak English or are new to the state.”*  
R&R Agency Staff

Most respondents in this study feel that the system can and should be more accessible and less complex.

Despite these common views, the lack of a common vision of the system was apparent. It was also vividly evident that each of the four players saw “their” perspective clearly, while the vision of the entire system and how it worked was partially concealed to them. Families clearly see child care centers/providers as allies.

*“They are nice to you and to your children at that center. They don’t treat you like you are poor. They look at you in your eyes like you are a person. They shake your hand and give you a hug. They aren’t afraid of you.”* A Parent

*“You work with them, confidentially. Sometimes I give them food, or at Christmas, I get them gift certificates to the Stop and Shop so they can get food.”*  
A Family Child Care Provider



On the other hand, families often recounted their suffering and confusion of their experiences with resource and referral agencies, the state government, and inconsistent policies. Indeed, some families see the R&R and the state aligning to keep services from them. Providers demonstrated a remarkable commitment to and synergy with the families. At the same time, providers bore the brunt of the unreimbursed cost of accepting subsidized care and expressed frustration with low rates, slow payment, and paperwork hassles, laying blame at the feet of resource and referral agencies and state government. Resource and referral agencies almost universally wanted to serve families better, but

felt restrained by some ambiguous state policies coupled with years of state budget cuts that reduced staff and available services. R&Rs were concerned that families and providers understand that they implement – but do not establish – state policies.

Certainly there is poor communication and limited understanding among the parties as well as a lack of a clearly articulated statewide “vision” that is communicated and shared among all parties: families, providers, R&Rs, and the state.

*“It is so hard to be poor and black in this city.”*

A Parent

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## Anchoring the Promise in Policy

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts and its new Department of Early Education and Care have a timely opportunity to improve the voucher subsidy system. The Department of EEC must address both the affordability and availability of early education and care for low-income families, the low reimbursement rates offered to providers, and the overall quality of services.

*“There is a need for unity particularly where there is one destiny.”*

(African Proverb)

New Massachusetts legislation has clearly articulated its promise: EEA is to be fully implemented no later than the 2012 school year, and to give priority to children in “low-wealth” communities. This study clearly shows that federally and state-funded child care vouchers are a viable means to enable this promise.

To be successful, a system of universal access to early education and care must be informed by vision and principles as well as by the nuts-and-bolts

techniques. We offer the following recommendation and four strategies for action.

*We recommend that Massachusetts develop a vision of universal early education and care that provides equal access to all, financed by a mix of private pay, contracts, vouchers, Head Start, and other means.*

How will this redress challenges of the voucher system? Efforts to distinguish between programs that are primarily designed to care for children so that parents can work (such as child care vouchers) and programs that are primarily designed as educational intervention to promote children’s cognitive and social development (such as public preschool) reflect an outmoded thinking inconsistent with the promise that Massachusetts has made through its legislative mandate in the spring of 2005. While this distinction might have made conceptual sense in an earlier era, in practicality, it is no longer meaningful. The children of low-income parents most in need of subsidized care are the same children who are at greatest risk of school failure and thus most in need of an affordable, accessible, quality early childhood education.



Children who receive subsidized care need a cognitively stimulating, culturally competent, and educational environment. Policymakers must establish and revise both programs and policies to consolidate these two purposes of *care* and *education*. This study shows that it makes no logical sense to treat the child differently based on how the cost of education and care is paid. All children need to have access to a quality education and care system. Currently, a formal initiative that begins to tie the various forms of child care and early

childhood education programs together does not exist and should be created.

*“Second only to the immediate family, child care is the context in which early development unfolds.”*

*From Neurons to Neighborhoods*  
Jack Shonkoff and Deborah Phillips, eds.  
National Academy Press, 2000

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## Strategies for Action

### **ONE: Lengthen the Certification Period of Child Care Vouchers**

Massachusetts should provide a one-year voucher that would allow for continuity of care for children; better funding stability for providers, which would lead to improved quality programming for all children; and greater access and affordability for families. The state now sets a six-month certification period, a policy which in practice is not being met for two-thirds of voucher recipients in this study. Although Massachusetts might begin by actually achieving its six-month certification goal for most families, this is viewed as an intermediate step to a larger child development goal of providing stable care for children over the course of a year. Yet, 90 percent of R&R staff surveyed agreed that the voucher system focuses on monitoring parents’ continuing service need, at the expense of children’s continuity of care.

Providing a one-year voucher is already being accomplished in several innovative states, such as New Jersey and Maryland, as well as the District of Columbia. A longer certification period is needed to reduce the short “voucher spells” that this study found characterize the Massachusetts child care voucher system. As this study shows, Massachusetts has a problem with families transitioning on and off of vouchers due to changes in eligibility. The

state must decide whether it will recognize and secure the needs of the child regardless of changing parental circumstances.

### **TWO: Support Families; Ease Administrative Burdens They Face**

Welfare policy has “multiple and complex” effects on parents. Once families qualify for assistance, they often face obstacles to maintaining their eligibility. Many experience conflicts between fulfilling their parental responsibilities and satisfying the requirements of work. Families may have their services disrupted due to language difficulties and communication breakdowns with agencies. Administrative practices are perceived to be a hassle that can jeopardize families’ employment as well as child care stability.

Massachusetts can better support families in several ways: eliminate the prevalence of “double documentation” among agencies; address transportation issues and office service hours; address unsubsidized time periods such as school vacations; provide translation services for families; reduce the waiting lists of 17,400 children as has been addressed in states such as Rhode Island, Oregon, and Vermont; and update co-payment and income eligibility criteria. Families who do not speak English have an urgent need for support as they navigate the child care subsidy system.



### **THREE: Increase Reimbursement Rates as a Means to Enhance Quality and Reduce Administrative Burden for Providers**

Once in a child care setting, the child care provider largely determines the quality of early education and care a child receives. This study shows that child care providers work hard to establish a bond of trust with parents and to offer a higher quality of programming than that for which they are paid.

Massachusetts must increase rates paid to providers; streamline administrative requirements, supporting effective and efficient business practices and decreasing uneven cash flow; and consider paying providers prospectively, enhancing the likelihood that more providers will participate in the subsidy system. (This prospective payment process is used in New Jersey.)

### **FOUR: Strengthen the Resource and Referral Function**

All of the R&R staff interviewed discuss their commitment to helping families achieve self-sufficiency, and each believes that a child care subsidy is an important tool that supports families in this endeavor. However, although fraud is considered to be very minimal, many times negative attitudes about families form within staff, as they encounter some fraud, perceived or real, in the system. These attitudes are further reaffirmed by the state's emphasis on excessive documentation and fraud monitoring.

Massachusetts must better fund the R&R system, so that caseloads can be reduced. (Prior to 1990, the average voucher caseload was 150-180 families; it is now, on average, about 350 families per counselor.) Better funding would also enable R&Rs to provide more support services to families; they now report that they spend about 20 minutes with each family. Moreover, families appear to need more support in the task of identifying child care. Also, efforts to support non-English-speaking families must be increased.

Funding should also be allocated to reimburse R&Rs for their provider-focused work, including enrollment, billing, technical assistance, and training and auditing tasks, all of which have to be taken into account and financed as their own caseload. Communication with state government must be increased to promote greater consistency in policy interpretation and implementation; policy inconsistencies are now reported to be widespread.

With this vision, and these four policy strategies, all children in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts will have access to affordable high-quality, culturally competent care. Vouchers simply become one of several sources – and a significant one – of funding early education and care for some children some of the time. When children's eligibility for vouchers expires due to changes in their parents' circumstances, there must be other mechanisms that provide for continuous, stable education and care for that child.

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## **Keeping the Promise**

In sum, based on this study and voucher studies from different states, it appears that there are several variables that would indicate the positive impact of subsidy policies. These include higher provider reimbursement rates, low number of children on the waiting lists, wide age-range of eligible children, income eligibility for parents set at the highest percentage level allowed, additional supports given to child care providers

who accept vouchers, and assistance provided to low-income families unrelated to welfare status. In addition, there are other areas that inform good voucher policy practice: a simplified eligibility determination process for parents, a generous time period for families to be eligible for subsidies, innovative use of state and local agencies to inform parents of child care assistance, and coordination among agencies to provide a wide range of services



for families who are on child care assistance. It is also important to ensure that parents using child care vouchers are able to purchase quality care and that providers who accept vouchers are able to do so with minimum administrative burdens.

Given its unique circumstances at this point in time, Massachusetts can design a system that will maximize the positive intended impacts and reduce

any negative impacts. Massachusetts and the new Department of Early Education and Care have the opportunity to improve the voucher system to address not only the affordability and availability of early education and care for low-income families, but also workforce development for providers serving low-income families and the quality of early education and care for low-income children.

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