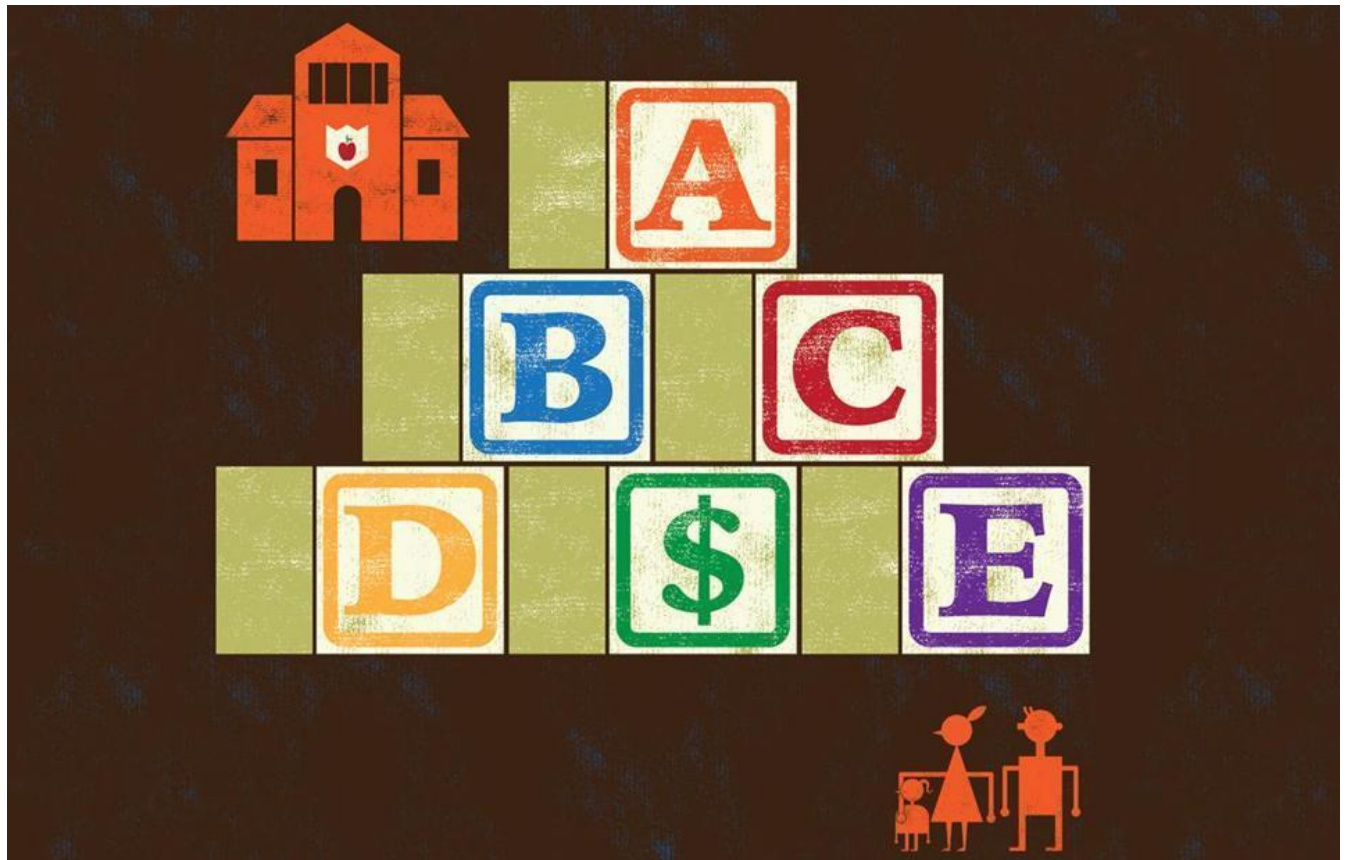


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Child care for \$10 a day

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About 70,000 babies will be born in Massachusetts next year. Their parents are probably already fretting about how to pay for college. But finding affordable child care over the next four years will prove far more daunting and — for far too many — more expensive.

There is an urgency to this problem because the benefits of safe and reliable child care compound over a lifetime. Among educators and policy makers, the consensus is nearly unanimous that early childhood education reaps [meaningful learning](#) and socio-emotional results, particularly for low-income kids. Less discussed is how it can empower families and the economy. Affordable universal child care from birth to kindergarten is the best way to support children and their families during this critical period of physical, neurological, and emotional development. It leads to healthier children, flourishing families, and a more upwardly mobile society. It is an attainable goal given the breadth of stakeholders from the State House to grass-roots activists who've made separate pieces of such a comprehensive program their individual missions. What's needed now is a unity of effort, a model for success, and the will to forge a system that matches our current needs.

The Commonwealth has the most expensive child care in the country. Parents of infants pay, on average, about \$17,000 a year for a spot at a day-care center — in other words, \$6,000 more than in-state college tuition, according to a [new report](#) by the advocacy group Child Care Aware. For single parents, this represents 61 percent of their income. And that's only if there are spaces available: Some parents join day-care wait lists the moment the pregnancy test pings positive. Even then, it often isn't soon enough. Hiring a nanny, the most flexible care option, is even more expensive.

It all stems from an alarming mismatch between the supply of child care and the demand for it. In Boston, there are 775 infant spots at licensed centers. Some parents are able to stay home, and many families find alternate arrangements, so the numbers aren't precise, but consider that there are five times as many seats (3,979) for 5-year-old children in kindergarten in the Boston Public Schools. In other cities around the state, the numbers are even more dramatic: There are 28 spots for infants at licensed centers in Lowell.

America's public early childhood education system starts, in the best cases, at age 3. Until then, young families are left on their own to muddle through a complex, costly, and largely unregulated patchwork of child-care providers. Costs ripple outwards: US businesses lost [\\$4.4 billion](#) in 2014 due to employee absenteeism and lost productivity as a result of child-care breakdowns. For families in all but the wealthiest households, the lack of affordable child care can lead to fewer children, financial insecurity, and educational setbacks — all of which restrict upward mobility.

Faced with a similar failure of the care market two decades ago, the Canadian province of Quebec decided on drastic intervention. Alongside more generous parental leave, extended school hours, and full-day kindergarten, its leaders today spend about \$1.8 billion a year in reduced-fee child care starting as soon as parents return to work. The objective was to have a day-care spot for every child in the province who needed one. And every family, regardless of income or child's age, would pay the same low amount: \$3.75 per day, or about \$975 annually.

The returns on that investment were robust and far-reaching: Women flooded into the workforce, child poverty was halved, the number of single-parent households on welfare dropped by 60 percent, and incomes of those families rose more than 80 percent.

If Quebec is any model — and it should be — one of the most effective things Massachusetts could do to create a more equitable society for future generations would be to give every family access to high quality, subsidized child care from infancy. The target should be \$10 per day for all families. Here's how to get there.

SUBSIDIZED CHILD care is only one of a number of antipoverty initiatives that Quebec has undertaken since 1997, but University of Quebec economist Pierre Fortin argues it deserves the lion's share of credit for results in reducing

poverty and welfare rolls. Says Fortin: “To make everyone — including the government — richer was not the program’s goal, but it was nevertheless the outcome.”

Today, Quebec, which has slightly more children under the age of 4 than Massachusetts, has the lowest provincial child poverty rate in Canada, at 8.4 percent. It took work. In the late 1990s, Quebec women ages 25 to 44 worked outside the home in lower numbers compared to the rest of Canada — today 85 percent do, up from 75 percent. According to Fortin’s work, reduced-cost care accounted for some 70,000 women returning to work in 2008 alone. In 1997, nearly 100,000 single-parent families in Quebec received welfare benefits. As of January 2016, that figure had dropped to 38,000.

Meanwhile, the birth rate climbed 10 percent, and more women are choosing to have families — a big turnaround for a province perennially worried about a declining number of babies.

Sixty-four percent of children now attend day care in Quebec, twice the rate of other provinces. (In other parts of Canada, [day care can cost as much as nearly \\$15,000 a year.](#)) The number of subsidized spots has risen from 74,000 when the law was passed to more than 285,000 in March 2016. Tens of thousands more are being added over the next few years.

Quebec’s equivalent of public school districts handle enrollment and administer the nonprofit child-care centers. Standard contracts are for 10-hour days, 261 days a year. Ninety-two percent of participants report being satisfied. A 2015 [study](#) found Montreal kindergarten children from low-income families who had access to subsidized care do two to three times better on cognitive and noncognitive tests than those who did not.

Families have benefited, but so has Quebec. There is higher employment and thus higher income tax revenue. Meanwhile, welfare payments have been reduced. The government recoups \$1.75 for every dollar spent on day care,

work by Fortin and colleagues suggests. A \$3.8 billion lift in Quebec's GDP can be directly linked to reduced-fee care, the economists found.

UNLIKE QUEBEC, the US military did not necessarily get into the business of high-quality child care to fight poverty or empower women. The Department of Defense now oversees one of the United States' largest, most respected day-care networks — which began, like so many good government programs, as a result of a scandal. Still, there is much for Massachusetts to learn.

A 1982 Government Accountability Office [report](#) found many of the military's child-care options did not meet fire and safety codes, inspections were unheard of, and the hourly wage of workers was less than that of the people who collected trash on military bases. Meanwhile, costs were prohibitively high for the rank-and-file.

All those findings, plus [child abuse allegations at a base in California](#), led to congressional hearings in 1988. The Military Child Care Act was passed the next year, which codifies standards, curriculum, and pay at more than 770 facilities offering school-age care and [child development centers](#) at more than 300 installations around the world today.

About [180,000 children](#) of military and Defense Department civilian personnel have spots at the centers, which are often staffed by military spouses. Fees are based on income, but charges start at as little as [\\$59 per week](#). Taxpayers subsidize a minimum of 50 percent of operating costs. A survey released this summer showed that only about 11 percent of civilian day cares nationwide are accredited by a national agency such as the gold-standard National Association for the Education of Young Children. The military requires all its centers be accredited, and it conducts unannounced inspections to ensure quality.

The Pentagon demands qualified workers, and pay and benefits are generous to reduce the type of turnover common at civilian child-care centers. (In Massachusetts, the average wage of day-care workers is roughly \$12, higher

than most of the country. Teachers in the military child-care program are paid on average \$15 an hour, according to Defense Department officials.)

Women today account for 15.5 percent of active-duty military personnel, up from the 2 percent allowed to serve in the 1970s. The military has become more diverse, and employment demographics generally have shifted. But the Pentagon knows well the importance of child care in maintaining the fighting force — male and female. Earlier this year, it pledged to shorten waiting lists and to expand the hours of operation at day-care centers. In all, the military services have requested at least \$1 billion to spend on child care and youth services in 2017.

People are the Department of Defense's most important resource, and it treats them accordingly. No workers want to worry about the safety and well-being of their children. Not if they're helming a submarine, not if they're flying a jet, not if they're manning a grill at McDonald's. It is in the community's interests to make child-care options at least an affordable possibility — if not a guarantee.

THERE WAS a time when most American households could afford to have someone — nearly always the woman — stay home and raise children. That's simply [no longer the case](#): The labor force participation rate for all women with children under age 18 was 69.9 percent in 2015. The networks of services that serve these families must change to meet their shifting needs. It isn't cheap, and it isn't perfect. But the status quo isn't tenable, either.

In recent years, rising costs have forced the Quebec government to implement a sliding fee scale based on income. For the poorest families, \$5.62 a day. For the wealthiest — households with annual income of about \$120,000 or more — \$15.37, or about \$4,000 annually. Centers have struggled to ensure consistent quality for all children. And the expense of identifying and training new staff and paying them well enough has heightened both of these problems.

Massachusetts has the ability to learn lessons from both these models and perfect them to the point where \$10 per day can buy high-quality care. In fact, there are few states in America better positioned to experiment with universal access. Our colleges and universities — particularly Lesley University, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Wheelock College — are at the forefront of research on how best to prepare early childhood educators. Our public schools networks — a logistical backbone for child-care expansion— are consistently among the top in the country. Some of the most ambitious and well-regarded child-care groups — The Nurtury, Ellis Memorial Early Education Center, the Wildflower schools — are already located here. Bright Horizons, which operates one of the largest private child-care networks nationwide, is headquartered in Watertown.

Massachusetts, in fact, already administers nearly \$500 million in subsidies to day-care centers that serve low-income children through its [Child Care Financial Assistance program](#) established in 2013. This project should be applauded, but even at about [58,000 children](#) served as of 2015, spaces are too few, waiting lists too long. Bureaucratic screw-ups that [have plagued](#) the program over the past year don't help.

In his state of the city speech last January, Mayor Martin J. Walsh [announced his support](#) for the Boston Basics campaign, which focuses on the vital years from birth to age 3. That's when 80 percent of brain development occurs. A growing body of research suggests that the return on investment for these costly programs targeting this critical stage of life is enormous. Nobel laureate James Heckman, a professor of economics at the University of Chicago, puts it at [13 percent per year](#) based on a longitudinal review of such efforts. That means stronger, fuller, healthier lives for children and their parents as well. In order to get there, [the State House](#), City Hall, early childhood educators, and caregivers should commit to this goal.

What cannot continue is the high price families are paying now. In [Suffolk County](#), the Child Care Aware report found, families with an infant and a

toddler pay an average of more than \$32,000 a year for day-care centers — or 146 percent of the average income for a single parent in the county.

In [Middlesex County](#), the price tag rises to nearly \$40,000.

In the ruins of the Great Depression, the United States made a commitment to its retirees through the establishment of Social Security. It was a promise to help people who could no longer work. That program wiped out poverty among the elderly, which is now below 8 percent. Today, 21 percent of children under age 6 — more than one in five — live in poverty. If their parents are unable to work, they can fall further behind. Without a solid start, safety nets risk becoming spiderwebs. Families at every income level would benefit from subsidized child care, but poorest families perhaps the most. And that would be an investment in the nation's future. Massachusetts should lead the way.