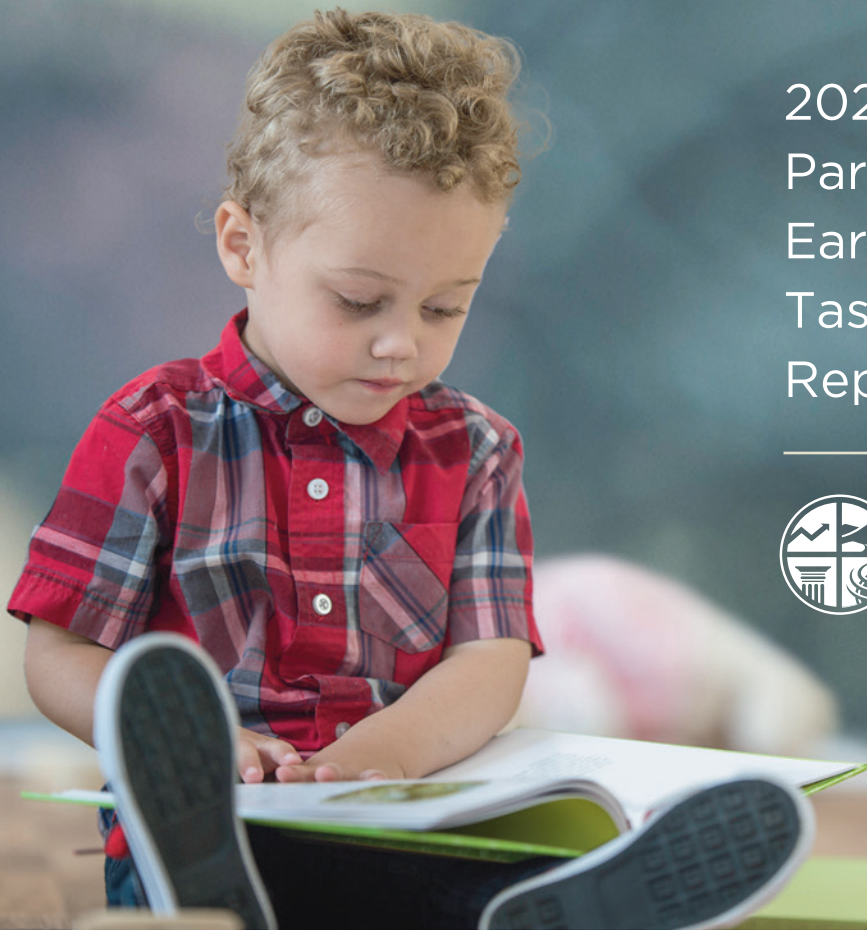


PERFECTLY *Invested*

2023 Blount
Partnership
Early Education
Task Force
Report



Blount
Partnership



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

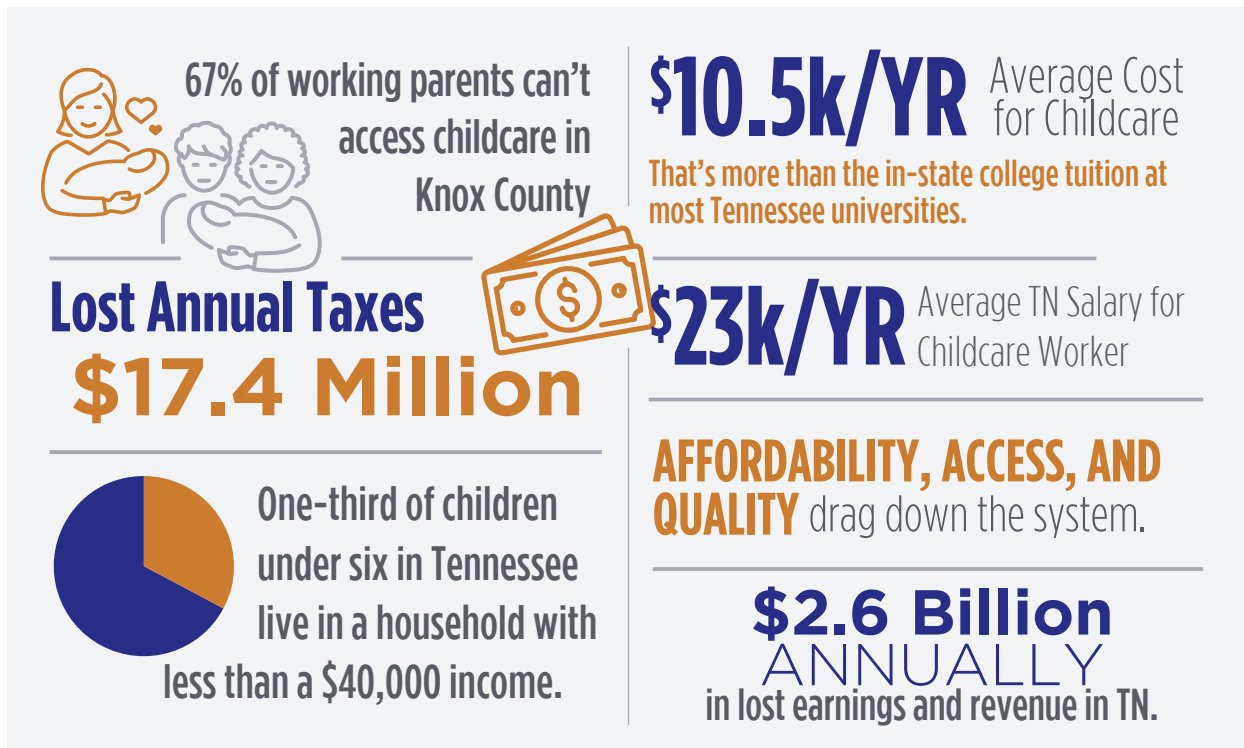
Blount Partnership formed the Early Education Task Force to assess childcare and early education needs in Blount County. They discovered a high demand to increase childcare capacity, offer more quality early education opportunities, and promote the need for state and national level changes to assist in improving both of these pieces.

Early education refers to structured learning experiences for children before they enter formal schooling. It encompasses a range of activities that focus on cognitive, emotional, physical, and social development during a child's formative years, typically between birth and age six. This period is widely recognized as a critical window of opportunity, wherein a child's brain undergoes rapid growth and development, forming the foundation for future learning with improved academic outcomes and success.

Early education is imperative in fostering the development of children. Investing in early education programs and emphasizing their positive impact on children, families, our workforce, and our community can create a more prosperous future.

Childcare Issues

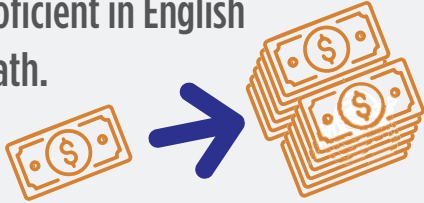
The Tennesseans for Quality Education (TQEE) report revealed the following childcare and early education issues.



The TQEE conducted a state-wide childcare and early education survey to provide insight into the adverse economic impacts of Tennessee's childcare system dysfunction. Additionally, TQEE conducted regional reports in the following locations: Davidson County, Hamilton County, Knox County, Northeast Tennessee, Shelby County, and West Tennessee. To read the state or regional reports in full, please visit www.tqee.org/2022-child-care-study.

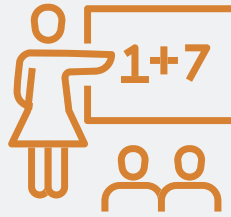


Nearly two-thirds of Tennessee's 3rd grade students are not proficient in English and Math.



Investments in high quality early education produce returns up to **\$13** for every **\$1** invested.

Credit TQEE - For more information, visit tqee.org.



Students not proficient in English and Math by third grade are 4

times more likely to drop out of high school and 60% less likely to pursue a post-secondary degree.



The brain develops more in the first five years than at any other time during a person's life.

The Blount Partnership is a partner on Loud Voices for Little Kids. Loud Voices for Little Kids is a TQEE campaign driven by advocacy groups, non-profit organizations, early educators, business leaders, parents and concerned citizens dedicated to advancing children's success in the early years - which studies show leads to greater success later in life. We aim to educate our community about early care and education policy priorities, as well as build a solid foundation for the state's youngest learners.

MISSION

Blount Partnership recognizes the need for early education and childcare in Blount County and has developed the Early Education Task Force to address access, availability, affordability, and quality early education.

Access to childcare now allows parents of young children to join the workforce with increased stability and work performance. Additionally, early literacy and kindergarten readiness enhance success in school and skills acquisition for the future of work.

Serving Blount County businesses and community, the mission of the Early Education Task Force is to promote economic growth and stability in Blount County by increasing workforce participation and work readiness with affordable, quality early education and childcare services.

Focus Groups

The Early Education Task Force identified three key groups to seek additional in-depth information on the need for childcare and early education resources in Blount County. Among these groups, working and non-working parents were also included in the focus groups.

- Early Education Professionals
- K-12 Educators
- Industry Leaders

External Programs Examined

MLK Center
Boys and Girls Club
Anderson County co-op
for childcare and large
employers

The Bezos Academy
Concrete Christian
Academy
Clarksville Industrial Park –
Youth Academy

Ballad Health
Chattanooga 2.0
Tyson
Dollar General
Pellissippi Micro-Centers

Chattanooga 2.0

Dr. Jared Bigham, who led Chattanooga 2.0, developed a community movement for early education. Chattanooga 2.0, which started as a workforce focus, implemented a preschool summer program for students to attend going into their Kindergarten year. This program had great impact on children's kindergarten readiness in Chattanooga. To tackle the large percentage of students who started Kindergarten but did not test Kindergarten ready, Chattanooga 2.0 started a summer preschool. The preschool was hosted in four elementary schools. After the summer, students, on average, increased 70 points on a 150-point scale measuring Kindergarten readiness. Bigham attributed the success of Chattanooga 2.0 to the committee's commitment to the mission.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Prevalent Themes—Access

LACK OF CAPACITY

Currently, there are not enough seats in preschools for all children who are in need of childcare or Pre-K in Blount County.

Industry leaders report that employees join waiting lists for childcare as soon as they get pregnant.

Many childcare facilities need more staff to be able to operate at their full capacity.

WAITING LISTS

Every childcare facility has a waiting list. Many of these waiting lists include 100+ awaiting children, with 18 months of waiting time. Some parents report waiting two or three years, with children aging out of the system before a spot is available.

The current average wait time for a licensed facility is



18 MONTHS.

Some parents report waiting up to three years.

AFFORDABILITY ISSUES

Women reported the need to work more hours due to childcare costs. 70% of households in Blount County have two working parents.

Affordable childcare is deemed to be 7% of household income. Median household incomes do not qualify for subsidies.

Industry representatives report losing numerous employees due to the lack of childcare and the financial implications of both parents working versus the high cost of childcare.

Early Education

LETTERS AND SOUNDS

Pre-K makes a monumental difference when students are exposed to letters and sounds and understand their correlation.

Pre-K plays an important role in Kindergarten, especially with children that do not come from homes that foster learning and promote good social skills.

SOCIAL SKILLS

Pre-K is also important for social skills. Many 5-year-olds face adult situations at home, and Pre-K provides a place to discover how to learn.

Pre-K gives children more confidence and helps them relate to peers.

PRE-K VS OTHERS

There is confusion on the difference between Pre-K, childcare, and mother's day out programs.

Some childcare facilities offer quality preschool curriculum, and some do not.

NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS

Some school systems have seen an increase in students who do not speak English. These students are even more at-risk for falling behind.

READING LEVELS DOWN

Educators cite a push for students to be on track in reading by 3rd grade and link that to the lack of Pre-K opportunities. The Literacy Success Act of 2021 initiated phonics-based literacy skills and universal screeners three times a year.

QUALITY

Hours of operation, amenities, services, smaller teacher to child ratios, and education opportunities determine quality childcare.

MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

There is a growing need for mental health support for early education facilities.

Resources & Parent Education

VALUE

Most parents need to be aware of Pre-K's value to their children. Those aware often don't have the opportunity to attend due to availability and cost.

Economic & Employer Impact

EMPLOYEE LOSS

Companies report that childcare affects their bottom line because they lose quality employees due to childcare-related issues.

YOUNG EMPLOYEES

Employers report that some young employees are holding off on having kids because they know childcare is an issue. This could lead to bigger workforce issues.

A PUBLIC ISSUE

Employers want quality childcare, but it is not their immediate focus as a company. They site liability and lack of childcare knowledge as barriers.

Workforce

TEACHER REQUIREMENTS

There are hefty requirements to become a preschool teacher, which makes it more difficult for preschools to recruit the workforce they need. Additionally, many childcare providers are aging out, and there are no replacements.

Child Development Associates (CDA) currently assist many head starts teachers. This year, teaching assistants are required beginning in pre-k. A CDA costs \$850 through Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance (TECTA).

High-quality early learning settings typically include

licensure, accreditation, and low staff-child ratios.

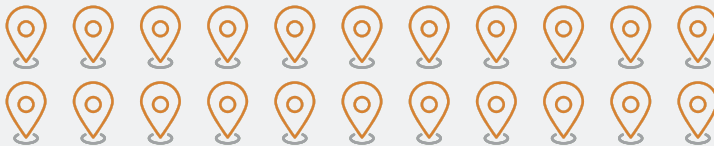


STAFFING

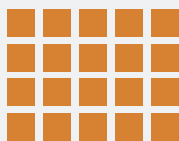
Experienced educators are hard to come by but are very valuable. It is left to the individual staff member to invest in staying current on training and updated practices. There needs to be an increase in the pipeline of early education workers.

There are **22 full-day childcare facilities*** with a capacity for **1,922 children** and **24 half-day programs** with a capacity for **811 children**.

Thirty-seven of those offer some assistance with proof of indigence.



*Parents' Day Out is omitted as they operate independently).



In 2019 there were
6,521 children in
Blount County ages 0-5.



Current capacity is
2,733 children
in registered childcare programs.



Leadership Blount Childcare Small Group

A Leadership Blount small-group project identified the need for childcare capacity data through conversations with the Blount Partnership. They gathered capacity data to assist in identifying and tackling this issue.

CURRENT PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES

ALCOA CITY SCHOOLS

Alcoa City Schools currently offers 40 spots for VPK. A small percentage of applicants are accepted. Spaces are limited due to staffing and class size requirements. Alcoa High School has interest in starting an Early Education CTE Program. Similar to a program in Knoxville, it would pair high school students with Pre-K at \$5 a day. Please visit: www.alcoaschools.net, for more information.

BLOUNT COUNTY BIRTH-TO-THREE PROGRAM

The Birth-to-Three Program (LTVEC) is a nationally recognized program that provides early intervention services to infants and toddlers as well as education and support to their families through a contract with the Tennessee Department of Education as well as significant funding from local communities in East Tennessee. Every dollar spent on early intervention realizes \$9 - \$14 cost-savings in future costs to education, social services, and judicial services. www.tn.gov/didd/for-consumers/tennessee-early-intervention-system-teis.html.

BLOUNT COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

The Blount County Public Library supports literacy at any age and all stages. Their programs for preschool age children include Baby & Me Storytime, Little Learners Storytime, and Movin' and Groovin'. Additionally, they offer many resources enticing children to learn such as audiobooks, interactive research databases, computer games, drawing, reading, writing, and more that approach literacy from many angles. To view their calendar of events and find out more, go to: www.blounttn.gov/2025/Public-Library.

BLOUNT COUNTY SCHOOLS

Blount County Schools has seven VPKs programs. The school system has on average around 750-800 kindergarten students with only 140 seats in VPK. Fifty percent of students qualify for free and reduced lunch, but they can only offer 16% of students VPK. To learn more about what they offer, visit: <https://www.blountk12.org/>.

Rockford Elementary hosts a summer reading program bringing college students in to read to children, helping them with their reading skills.

Kid Konnections is a program led by Linda Carraway that is unique to Blount County Schools. Previously known as Read for Success, it has been in place for many years. The program's mission is to seek personal connections between community volunteers and elementary students who need an extra boost in their reading skills. www.blountk12.org/students_families/student_services/kid_konnections.

FREEDOM SCHOOLS

The Children's Defense Fund's (CDF) Freedom Schools® program is a six-week long summer enrichment program with 3 hours of reading per day available to any child in Blount County. The program helps children fall in love with reading, increases their self-esteem, cultivates positive attitudes toward learning, and reduces summer learning loss—one of the major challenges affecting poor and working-class children. www.easttnfreedomschools.com.

There is a **real need for more childcare capacity** as well as **more childcare-certified staff members** to reach capacity at current childcare facilities.



IMAGINATION LIBRARY

Imagination Library gifts high-quality books to children from birth to age five, no matter of their family's income. This great program has a positive impact on early literacy. They share their information with all the childcare/preschool facilities and attend kindergarten registrations. Thanks to the local program sponsor, Kiwanis Club of Maryville, they have reached around 70% of children that live in Blount County. For more information, go to: imaginationlibraryblount.org.

MARYVILLE CITY SCHOOLS

Maryville City Schools has three VPK preschools, one within every elementary school. They have 60 spots every year, with priority given to students who are at-risk or economically disadvantaged. Maryville has seen the impact this has on kindergarten readiness for those students. The school reports that approximately 40% of students who qualify for this program but are not able to attend end up repeating kindergarten or 1st grade. MCS is not able to offer the preschool to everyone that needs it. They have a daycare at Coulter Grove for their staff with a waiting list and plan to open a sister daycare at Montgomery Ridge Intermediate School for their staff in the coming years. The daycare is not open in the summer and closes at 4:30 pm during the school year. Capacity continues to be a need. For more information about their programs and offerings, visit: www.maryville-schools.org.

THE MCNABB CENTER

The McNabb Center helps parents or caregivers struggling with a young child's behavior. The Regional Intervention Program (RIP), a nationally-recognized model, is designed to help children ages 2-5 decrease unwanted behaviors while strengthening social skills and empowering parents to set appropriate limits and consequences. www.mcnabbcenter.org.

PELLISSIPPI STATE

Pellissippi State Community College is trying to grow its early childhood education programs and opening a micro center at its Hardin Valley campus. If successful, more childcare opportunities may be added at additional campuses. PSCC's program serves their students in need of childcare. Read more about their programs at: www.pstcc.edu/.

UT KNOXVILLE

The University of Tennessee Knoxville is adding a Pre-K certification into their K-5-degree program. Go to: www.utk.edu/academics to learn more about what they offer.

VOLUNTARY PRE-K

VPK is a state-funded program that provides economically disadvantaged, special education, and at-risk children (ages 3-4) with the opportunity to attend high-quality Pre-K. For the history and standards, visit: www.tn.gov/education/districts/early-learning/voluntary-pre-k.html.

Ballad Health Childcare

Ballad Health has 22 hospitals with 12,000-13,000 employees and additional contract employees. They solely run two childcare facilities and operate one in coordination with the YWCA in Bristol. Ballad aims to remove barriers that hinder potential employees from joining their team. They currently have 260 spots with plans to have 2,000 available within the next 3 years with the addition of 11 childcare facilities.

Ballad needs help finding the right people for the childcare facilities. Their model includes increased compensation and professional status for those childcare workers. Individuals with associate's degrees have been beneficial for filling childcare positions. They have also successfully hired at-risk and single-income families as they can work in the childcare facility and have their children in childcare.

CHALLENGES

Access

LIMITED SPACE

There is currently limited childcare space, with a waitlist of around 18 months to 3 years.

SHIFT COVERAGE

The need for late-night and third-shift childcare needs to be explored, 5:00pm-10am. Currently, there is no data to support facility-provided childcare for these shifts, and residential childcare may be a better option for overnight care. Second and third shift workers have an even harder time finding availability due to hours of operation.

JOB MIGRATION

Many people have left hourly jobs for commission jobs and entrepreneurship due to more flexibility and for childcare. This was especially seen during the Covid-19 pandemic.

RATIOS

Teacher to child ratio sizes contribute to what childcare facilities can offer. Toddlers generate a greater percentage of income for facilities based on the teacher-to-student ratio. Infant classes are more expensive, leading to a larger gap in infant care.

SICK CHILDREN

Locally, there are currently no childcare options for sick children. Through community projects in some states, hospitals provide at-work childcare for employers with sick children.

SPACE

Childcare facilities cannot expand due to limited space in their facility, not just due to workforce shortages. The lack of commercial real estate available is a hindrance to those looking to open a new childcare facility.

Resources & Parent Education

PARENTAL MINDSET

Many parents are still of the mindset of wanting their children to stay at home until kindergarten. Although this works well in some families, a number of children would greatly benefit from the kindergarten preparedness that Pre-K provides.

Workforce

LOW WAGES

Low wages and lack of benefits prevent childcare centers from hiring and retaining childcare positions. The current range for childcare teachers is low to mid-teens, \$13-15, and lead childcare positions around \$30/hr.

STAFFING STABILITY

Staffing stability is an issue with employees who don't show up. Even the facilities with higher fees do not necessarily pay employees more. Non-profits can help keep costs down due to grants and subsidies. Further, Tennessee doesn't accept credentials for childcare workers from other states.

TRAINING

Some childcare facilities lack knowledge/awareness of opportunities available to train employees, especially in soft skills.

Legislation & Policy

REGULATIONS

Regulations related to outside play, toys, and teachers are extensive. Additional costs exist for supplies and facility needs.

Child Care tuition reimbursement rates do not reflect the total cost of delivering childcare.

REIMBURSEMENT

The reimbursement rate of state subsidies is based on tuition costs, not full costs incurred by the childcare facility. The current model only covers about 40% of incurred cost.

LEGISLATION

Legislatively, childcare needs are to be viewed as a business and workforce issue, not just a family issue. The Covid-19 pandemic is a prime example that demonstrated that without stable childcare, working parents stopped working. Childcare must be part of the business infrastructure.

LICENSURE

There is an 8–10-month lead time for pre-licensure to licensure. Focus group participants report a greater need for staff who perform pre-licensure site visits.

Concrete Christian Academy

Concrete Christian Academy is a full childcare and preschool facility in Murfreesboro. With 16 teachers and support staff, they have a capacity of 175 in seven classrooms from 6-weeks old to Kindergarten readiness. Currently only available to employees, they offer a discounted rate (\$100 less per week that the state recommendation), and are exploring opening to the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Access

EMPLOYER BUY-IN

Employers should explore ways to assist staff with childcare. Some employers have a formal written policy allowing employees to bring their children to work if needed.

Some employers partner with childcare facilities to hold spots for their employees every year or move their employees' children to the top of the list.

Increase Employer Assistance:

- Childcare subsidies – vouchers, certificates, jump-ahead on lists
- Backup childcare solutions
- More flexibility in jobs

- Flexible spending accounts to provide tax-free dollars for childcare
- Resources for babysitters/nannies
- On-site childcare
- Advocacy is recommended on tax credits for employees who provide or support employees with childcare services.

INFANTS ONLY

Explore an infant-only facility that feeds into certain preschools to increase capacity in the community.

SPONSORSHIP

Some communities have explored creating company sponsorships to cover the salary of a childcare teacher in order to increase capacity.

PARTNERSHIPS

Partner with local organizations to provide after-school childcare with educational opportunities.

Resources & Parent Education

PARENTAL EDUCATION

Provide materials to parents and grandparents on what resources are available regarding Pre-K-aged children through pediatricians and community organizations. Educate parents on what children need to know before starting school.

WEBSITE

Create a website with all the current childcare facilities' capacities and contact information as well as early literacy information. This is in progress by the Blount Partnership.

DEDICATED SUBS

Create a pipeline of dedicated substitutes at childcare facilities to be proactive due to the difficulty of finding qualified substitutes

Workforce

WORKABLE LEARNING

Have schools provide a curriculum for early education. Alcoa will start "Teaching as a Profession" class in 2023, but early childhood education is a separate curriculum. There needs to be an early education training pipeline.

Legislative & Policy

STATE SUPPORT

Advocate for additional state funds to expand the VPK and head start programs. Explore possibility of federal title funds that can be used for preschools.

Investigate state-funded universal preschool.

A lot of the state grants are for facility enhancements rather than salaries.

LOW-INTEREST LOANS

Other communities are looking at providing no to low-interest loans to those individuals who want to open a childcare facility.

TUITION REIMBURSEMENT

There is a need to expand childcare tuition reimbursement to support more families who fall under the benefits cliff. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to employees and members of the workforce if the state would grant grace periods for childcare tuition certificates so that single parent/caregivers can apply and interview for jobs.

Clarksville Industrial Park

Clarksville Industrial Park will have an entire campus designed around early childhood development and quality preschool education. The 18-acre Youth Academy will be a premier childcare facility with a baseball field, swimming pool, two buildings for different ages, and extended hours of 5:0am to 10:00pm. Once 100% finished, it will have a capacity of 800 students with 400 slots discounted and reserved for industrial park employees and military families. The local industrial board and county approved the rezoning and repurposing of the industrial park lot to a commercial lot. The economic development agency treated it like a PILOT for any company they would recruit and offered incentives such as tax abatements in exchange for an agreement to locate on the property for a number of years. They are also asking employers located in the park to incentivize and subsidize for their employees.

CONCLUSION

Investing in early education yields high returns, both economically and socially. By allocating resources to expand access to affordable, quality early education programs, we can ensure that every child has the opportunity to develop to their full potential, fostering a more equitable and prosperous society.

Importance of Early Childhood Education

- Birth to age five: brains grow and develop at a rate unmatched later in life.
- School readiness begins at home, but young children enrolled in high-quality early learning opportunities reap short- & long-term benefits:
 - Improved literacy and numeracy skills
 - Healthy social and emotional development
 - Decreased enrolment in special education
 - Higher grade retention and graduation rates
 - Higher earners in the workforce
- High-quality early learning settings typically include licensure, accreditation,
- and low staff-child ratios.
- Reliable childcare also enables parents to work, attend school or attend other job training opportunities.
- There are many long-term socioeconomic benefits.

The importance of increasing capacity is equally important for our workforce, industries, and parents. Early education lays the groundwork for future success by fostering skills, values, and behaviors that are essential in the professional world. Through increasing capacity and access to quality early education, industries can expect a more skilled and adaptable workforce and parents can balance their careers with the assurance that their children are receiving the best start in life.

Importance of Increasing Capacity

- Investing in early education contributes to the creation of a sustainable talent pipeline for industries leading to a steady supply of skilled and knowledgeable professionals.
- Industries benefit from employees who are not only skilled but also balanced and focused. Access to early education allows working parents to have reliable care for their children, reducing stress and distractions at the workplace.
- Businesses and industries that support and promote access to early education demonstrate social responsibility. This commitment to the well-being and development of future generations enhances their reputation and fosters positive relationships with communities, customers, and stakeholders.
- Ultimately, investing in early education by increasing capacity contributes to the overall economic growth of a region or country. Well-educated individuals are more likely to be productive citizens, contributing to the economy through higher earnings and reduced reliance on social services.

The need for early education is undeniable. We can lay the foundation for a more prosperous future by prioritizing early education. Investing in early education programs not only benefits individuals but also strengthens communities and societies at large.

For more information or to get involved in Blount Partnership's Early Education Task Force, email Jessica Belitz, Director of Workforce Development, at jbelitz@blountpartnership.com.