

A human infrastructure stimulus is needed

Invest in universal access to child care, early education

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IN THE MIDST of the COVID-19 crisis, the United States stands at an inflection point; our policymakers hold in their hands the future of the American narrative. In this time of uncertainty, what will we prioritize when it comes to rebuilding our country's infrastructure? The Great Depression and World War II birthed the New Deal, which proved to be a catalyst for unprecedented prosperity and global leadership. Economic inequality in the United States declined well into the 1970s as the lowest wage earners enjoyed more rapid earnings growth. By the 1970s, we **led the world** in college degree attainment. By 1985, the US **was a global leader** in female workforce participation.

Today, however, we fare far worse than most other industrialized nations. According to the World Bank's Human Capital Project, human infrastructure in the United States is underperforming as compared to our global peers. We have lower life expectancy, female workforce participation, and college degree attainment. This is the trajectory the country is currently offering our children, who deserve better.

At this moment, the United States now has a once-in-a-generation chance to turn this around. What we include in the stimulus packages required to avoid depression will determine if the country can recapture its role as a global leader. While investment in physical infrastructure is undoubtedly needed, it is far from enough. We must seize this opportunity to invest in our human infrastructure. The underinvestment in human capital is a missed opportunity to create a virtuous cycle between physical and human capital and growth and poverty reduction. Now is the time to finally join our peer nations and provide universal access to high quality child care, early education, and school-age care for all American children and families.

As has been extensively documented, there is perhaps no investment with a greater return than those made in our children. According to Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child, long-term studies show early education for children living in poverty can produce benefit-cost ratios as high as 17:1. Science tells us that learning begins at birth and that the first five years of life reflect a period of brain development and opportunity that is unmatched throughout life. Children who participate in high-quality early learning programs have increased educational attainment, increased lifetime earnings, and better health. Children whose families earn more also fare better; access to robust, affordable child care both enables parents to work and reduces household expenses, which in turn supports healthy child development.

There remains little doubt that the child care and early education sector directly promote the strength of our nation's education attainment and workforce participation rates. Thus, in addition to solving for access, we must invest in the early educators upon which the system rests and pay them wages commensurate with the valued role they play in society. Early educators

provide a critical foundation of security and education for young children while their parents are at work. It's time to recognize the critical role these educators play in supporting the workforce of today and nurturing our country's smallest assets.

Such targeted support for child care and early education is not a singular investment: it yields additional benefits for the greater economy. Child care and early education providers themselves constitute thousands of nonprofit and for-profit small businesses. Given the high level of attention our youngest children need, growing the early education workforce will add hundreds of thousands of jobs at a time when they are desperately needed.

It also will ensure that economic recovery is more broadly shared. Child care and early education is a field dominated by women of color. While investments in physical infrastructure will boost employment largely for white men, concurrent prioritized investment in early education and care also would boost employment for women. Infusing the sector with the additional funds will ensure the new economy we build is more equitable than our current one.

Finally, ensuring access to affordable early education and care would directly spur increased workforce participation in general. Put simply, investing in the early childhood field is investing in the economic engine that will propel the United States forward in a post COVID-19 world. Access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education and care is exactly what's needed to ensure that our top talent in every field and at every level are able to return to work.

And this isn't just an investment in today. This truly is the stimulus investment that will restore American leadership. We, the leaders in the early education field, stand ready to build a better future.

J. Justin Pasquariello is the executive director of East Boston Social Centers, Kate Barrand is president and CEO of Horizons for Homeless Children, Kathy Lafferty is executive director of South Boston Neighborhood House, Lauren Birchfield Kennedy is co-founder of Neighborhood Villages, Maicharia Weir Lytle is president and CEO of United South End Settlements, Janet MacDougall is the divisional director of the child care division of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Boston, Laura Perille is president & CEO of Nurtury, Mary Kinsella Scannell is vice president of Boys & Girls Clubs of Dorchester, and Sharon Scott-Chandler is executive vice president and chief operating officer of ABCD Inc.

Meet the Author

J Justin Pasquariello

Executive director, East Boston Social Centers

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Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Boston

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Sharon Scott-Chandler

ABCD Inc.

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[Meet the Author](#)

Lauren Cook

CEO, Ellis Memorial

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