

# Opinion: Early childhood education is the smartest investment we can make in Delaware kids

Stuart Comstock-Gay and Lynn Adams Kokjohn | Published Jan. 22, 2019

*Stuart Comstock-Gay is president and CEO of the Delaware Community Foundation. Lynn Adams Kokjohn is chair of the Fund for Women at the DCF.*

How can we really expand opportunity for kids in Delaware?

Plain and simple, invest in high-quality early childhood education, said Robert Putnam, author of New York Times bestseller “Our Kids.”

Putnam has investigated decades of data on the factors that influence kids’ lives, in school and throughout their future.



Stuart Comstock-Gay

When Putnam visited Delaware this fall for a Delaware Community Foundation event, his presentation made clear that early learning is one of the best – and highest yielding – investments a society can make. Experts equate a \$4 to \$9 return for every dollar spent on high-quality early learning programs for low-income children.

And yet, in Delaware, [only about 50 percent of children participate](#) in any early care or education setting before kindergarten, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The evidence, Putnam said, is stunningly clear. Research proves that the first years of life are the most crucial to a child’s healthy development. During this period, one million new brain connections form every second, laying a foundation for social-emotional development, learning and skill building.

Without experiencing this rich stimulation, a child begins school at a disadvantage, without the basic foundation so essential to a successful school career. The child will fall further and further behind their peers and increasingly diminish their chances for graduation and economic security.



Lynn Kokjohn

We applaud Governor Carney’s just-announced initiative to expand funding in the most critical areas of education: English learners and low-income students. This is a vital component of Delaware’s economic progress and the Governor has recognized that.

To bolster the success of this initiative, we urge that it be paired with additional investment in early childhood education, which will magnify the benefits to children and further expand the advantages to their families and the community as a whole.

Two existing programs that are good examples of investing in early learning are Purchase of Care (POC) and the Stars quality rating system.

POC is a state program that helps pay for early learning for about 15,000 children every year. Families that qualify choose from centers that accept POC payments – not all do – and the state reimburses that provider based on the available resources. The reimbursement rate is about 50 percent of the cost of care.

The Stars quality rating system supports and incentivizes the high-quality pre-K that we know produces the best results for children in Delaware’s mix of private and faith-based providers.

Unfortunately, both of these programs struggle to meet the need because state funding isn’t keeping up with increasing costs. These funding shortages deprive children of the strong start that they need – and that our community needs – to attain economic success.



*Classroom teacher Nicole Cardinale, left, and paraprofessional Julie Poore, right, work with their class on learning how to read a calendar at Appoquinimink Preschool Center in Middletown. (Photo: Jason Minto/The News Journal)*

We know it’s possible for our pre-K programs to make a real impact because we see it in action in the Colonial School District’s preschool programs; at St. Michael’s, a 5-star program serving children from low-income homes in Wilmington; Boys & Girls Clubs programs throughout the state; and at Project VILLAGE, the Indian River School District’s program focused on 3- and 4-year-old English learners.

In the words of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, “(Pre-K) is a wise investment in America’s future, strengthening business today while building the workforce we’ll depend on tomorrow and for decades to come.”

###