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More childcare money would pay off

The average childcare worker in West Virginia makes \$7.33 an hour. The average parking lot attendant makes \$8.33, and an animal trainer makes \$14.39. Don't even think about health insurance.

If you think of child care as simply keeping children from going hungry or getting under the kitchen sink, you may not be bothered that one who is responsible for a lot full of other people's valuable cars makes more.

But if you realize that child care should offer not only a safe place for children to stay, but also the stimulating environment of a good preschool and the patient understanding of a warm grandmother, plus decent food and a little playtime in the fresh air, it is difficult to see how anyone does it at \$7.33 an hour.

While the state has been working steadily to improve child care, the actual amount of money available to pay staff, encourage them to go to school and teach them how to be good models for children has actually shrunk during the last eight years, says Renate Pore, a longtime health and early education policy analyst.

This happened while the economy was relatively good, while nearly all parents are expected to work and while state and federal governments are spending more than ever on early childhood education.

West Virginia spent \$74 million on young children in several categories during the 2007 budget year, or \$590 for every child under 6, a rate better than the national average. But when you look at child care alone, the state spends only about \$207 per child under 6. That's far less than almost all the surrounding states.

Most of West Virginia's early childhood money goes to public pre-kindergarten classes for 4-year-olds. Nothing against pre-k, but programs vary by county, are open a limited number of hours a week and close during the summer.

"It's not a solution for parents who work," says Pore, who has compiled three reports on the plight of childcare in West Virginia for the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy. She has found:

- The state spends \$26.9 million a year on child care not counting pre-K. That's a slight increase of \$1.5 million from the 2007-08 budget year. Much of that money is transferred from the federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. About \$6.9 million is state general revenue.
- West Virginia has the highest percentage of low-income children whose families really need help paying for childcare. However, the state has cut both the number of families and the amount paid to childcare providers on their behalf in recent years.
- Previously, the state helped families living up to 200 percent of the federal poverty limit. Now the cutoff is 150 percent of federal poverty, or \$26,400 a year for a family of three, or \$31,800 for a family of four.
- Co-payments required by West Virginia families who receive a child-care subsidy have gone up, but are still more reasonable compared to other states, are limited to a percentage of income and capped at \$81 a month.
- Childcare workers in the state - practically all women - are the 47th lowest paid child care workers in the country.
- Childcare workers who go to college in the field leave their jobs for school systems where they get twice the money plus benefits.
- With inflation, the state's child care buying power is about \$8 million a year less than it was in 2001.
- The number of children served has fallen from 19,312 to 13,302.

Pore believes the solution is another \$51 million a year. That would put the state level with Ohio in childcare spending (about \$615 per child under 6). Another \$10 million a year for the next five years would make a big difference, she said.

For their investment, West Virginians would get a better class of childcare. That money might be found in the \$75 million surplus, in an electricity transmission tax proposed by Gov. Manchin or in the corporate net income tax that is being phased out, Pore said.

The money would pay higher wages to child care workers and keep them in their jobs longer. It could help programs pursue accreditation, offer scholarships or improve facilities. It would strengthen the child care industry, lead to more

openings, both for children and staff.

The best childcare really does turn out children who are ready to succeed in school. Pore suggests holding childcare programs accountable to that goal. Teachers say they can tell when children enter kindergarten which ones have attended really good preschool or day care centers. Why not quantify that knowledge? Assess children coming into kindergarten and use the results to judge the childcare programs they were enrolled in.

West Virginians should see the bang for their buck.

In 20 years, the investment should pay off in a smart, nimble, creative workforce whose needs were attended to from the start by their wise elders.

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