

Early Learning

Introduction

From birth to five years, a child's brain develops at a rapid rate. Brain development at an impressionable young age is influenced by several factors, including a child's experiences, relationships, and environment. High-quality early education is fundamental in building a child's foundation to learn and to develop throughout his or her life. During a child's crucial years, early education fosters cognitive and character skills along with attentiveness, motivation, self-control, and sociability, all of which are necessary for success in school, health, career, and life.

Not all children have access to high-quality early education. Children living in low-income families are less likely to have the access to a high-quality early learning program, lacking the education, social, and economic resources to provide the early developmental stimulation that is helpful for success. By the time young children reach school age, they are far behind their peers who come from middle-class families. Poor health, dropout rates, poverty, and crime can be reduced if there are more opportunities for at-risk children.

**South Dakota young children
(3 and 4 year olds) not in school, 2012-2014**

**61%
or 15,000
children**



National Studies

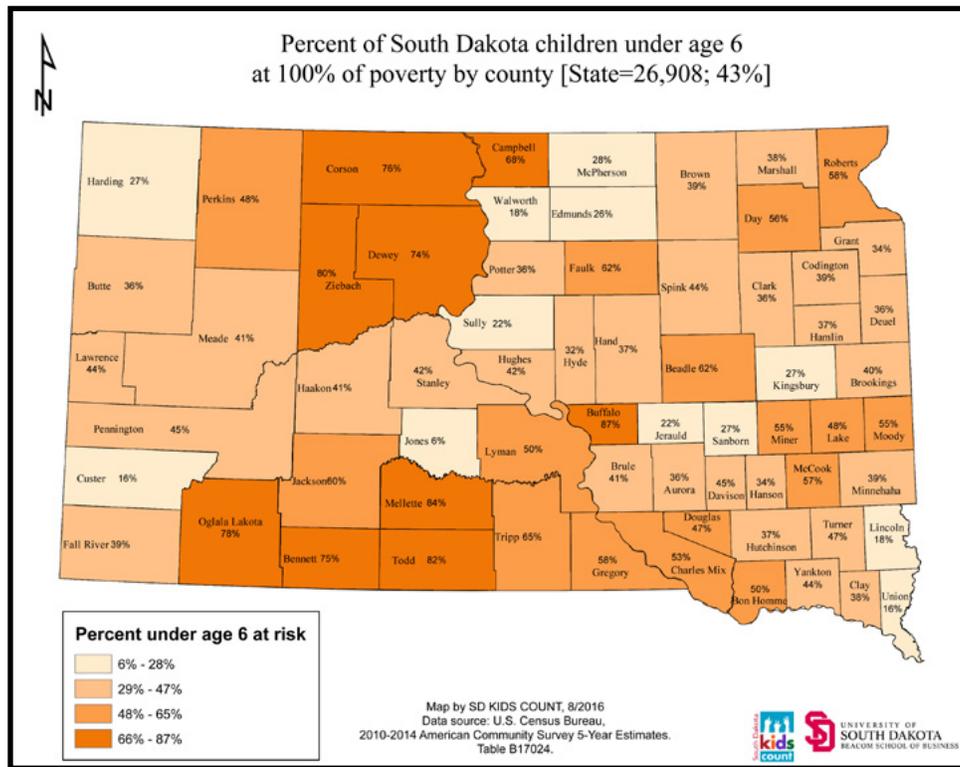
Studies reveal children eighteen months old who have grown up in middle-income families know 60 percent more words than children of the same age from poor backgrounds. By the age of three, children coming from poor families have heard up to 30 million fewer words being spoken in their homes or child-care settings than their middle class peers. By age five, these children score two years behind the middle-class peers on standardized language development, and by the fourth grade, they are unable to read with even basic proficiency, putting them at risk for chronic academic underperformance and diminished job prospects later on. In South Dakota, based on Census Bureau 2010-2014, five year estimates, almost 27,000 children (43%) under age 6 are living in poverty. The map on page 2 shows the percentages by county. It is important children have access to high-quality early education where teachers and care providers foster language development and encourage families from poor backgrounds to have conversation and the exchange of words with their young child.¹

According to James J. Heckman, an investment in a child's early education will affect future social costs, which will promote economic growth. The Heckman Equation:

Invest + Develop + Sustain = Gain

- **Invest** - in educational and developmental resources for disadvantaged families to provide equal access to successful early human development
- **Develop** - early development of cognitive and social skills in children from birth to age five
- **Sustain** - early development with effective education through adulthood
- **Gain** - a more capable, productive and valuable workforce that pays dividends to America for generations to come.²

The HighScope Perry Preschool Study found individuals who were enrolled in a high-quality preschool program ultimately earned up to \$2,000 more per month than those who were not. The study also found that adults at the age of 40 who had the high-quality preschool program were more likely to hold a job, had committed fewer crimes, and were more likely to have graduated from high school than adults who did not have preschool.³



The Need for an Early Learning System

“Young children have approximately 1,825 days between birth and the day they arrive in kindergarten. Fully 85 percent of core brain structure is formed by the time children enter kindergarten. Science confirms that this period is critical in forming the foundation of emotionally healthy, creative, resourceful, intellectually curious, socially connected, entrepreneurial members of society.”⁴

Building a quality early care and education system requires investments to assure access to high-quality child care for all families, especially working families. Research found that children enrolled in high-quality early care and education programs show improved school readiness, achievement, and are less likely to repeat grades, drop out of school or need special education. Early-childhood education includes child care, Early/Head Start, and preschool. “Increasingly, educators and policymakers view early education as a continuum that extends well into the first years of formal schooling—kindergarten through 3rd grade in particular.”⁵

Child Care

Child care is a critical part of the early learning system, providing children opportunities to gain social, emotional and cognitive skills. Families need reliable, affordable child care in order to be in the workforce. With so many children spending time each day in a child care environment, the quality of that care becomes a vital issue. Young children need a schedule that is responsive to their needs, with appropriate stimulation and time to rest. They need to be talked to and played with. They need love and attention. And they need the opportunity to form a comfortable, secure relationship with a caregiver who will nurture their healthy emotional development (Zero to Three, 2012).

The 2015 SD Child Care Workforce and Market Rate Report estimated there were 34,431 children in South Dakota enrolled in regulated child care.⁶ South Dakota provides child care subsidies to assist low-income families as they work, attend school or both.

Eligibility is based on gross family income and household size. The program helps pay for child care for children under age 13 (or up to age 18 for children with special needs) if family income is less than 175% of the Federal Poverty Level [FPL]. In 2016, a family of four would qualify at 175% of the FPL if their annual income was less than \$42,525.⁷

Early Head Start and Head Start

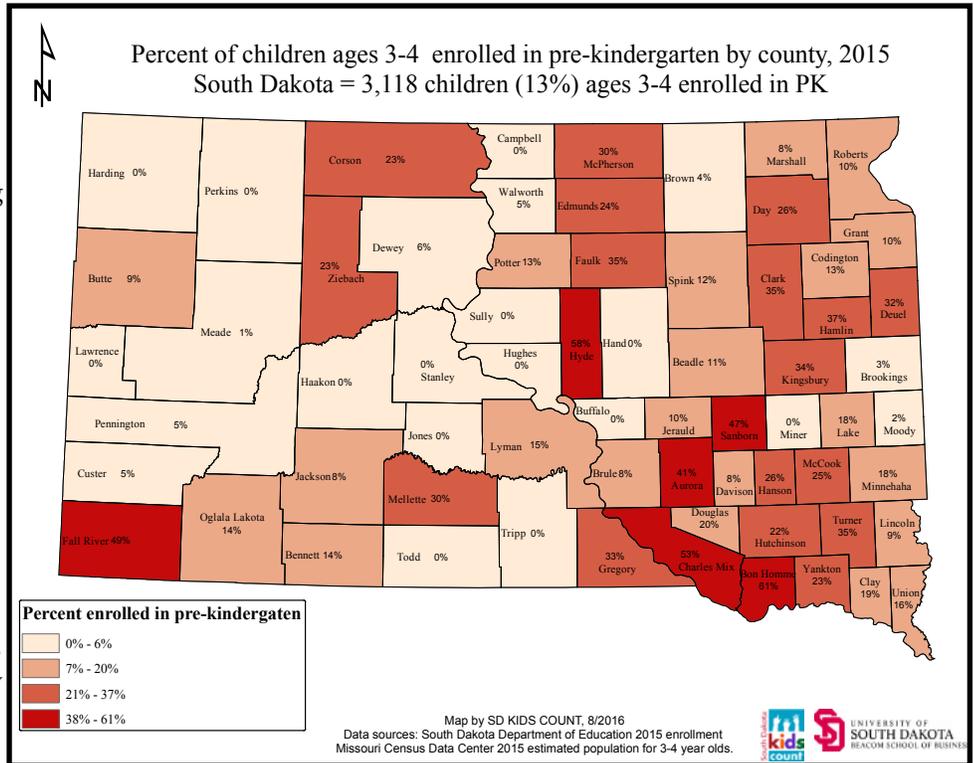
Early Head Start and Head Start programs in South Dakota provide access to learning opportunities for children who live in poverty. Head Start takes a comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of the whole child and whole family. This two-generation approach supports stability and long-term success for the families who are most at risk.⁸ There are eight Tribal and eight non-tribal Early Head Start and Head Start programs in the state. In 2015, there were 4,730 funded slots* for children 0-5 years.⁹

Preschool

South Dakota is one of only eight states without a recognized state-funded pre-kindergarten (pre-k) program. Many states have been establishing publicly funded pre-k programs for 3- and 4-year-olds to improve school readiness, particularly those from low-income families. Research findings show high-quality preschool education can enhance a child's learning and development. This preparation gap contributes to long-range educational inequality, achievement gaps, and ultimate income inequality across socioeconomic groups, races and ethnicities. A national group of economists and business leaders recommend investing public funds to expand access to high-quality pre-k programs, stating that high-quality pre-k has the potential to:

- Produce societal benefits that far outweigh program costs by improving the later education, employment, earnings, and crime outcomes of students who attend preschool.
- Enhance the fiscal position of states and the nation by reducing education and criminal justice costs, while boosting income-tax revenues.
- Add to long-term economic growth and development for states and the nation.¹⁰

In South Dakota, about 13% of children ages 3-4 are enrolled in pre-kindergarten. The map shows the percentage by county for 2015. In addition, South Dakota has these early learning programs:



- Birth to Three early intervention program <http://doe.sd.gov/oess/birthto3.aspx>
- Early intervention – Pre-school <http://doe.sd.gov/oess/sped-earlyIntervention619.aspx>
- South Dakota Bright Start <http://www.sdbrightstart.com/>

South Dakota Early Learning Guidelines can be found on the SD-Department of Education website: http://doe.sd.gov/oess/documents/HEADSTART_EarlyLearningGuidelines.pdf

Early Learning domains include: social-emotional development and approaches toward learning, language and literacy, mathematics, science, health and physical development, creative arts, and social studies.

Conclusion

A recently released report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education had this to say about early childhood education, “The research is clear on the benefits of high-quality early education for children from birth to age five. For many working families, access to affordable, reliable, and high-quality child care and early education is both a necessity to attain and maintain a job and to foster the learning and development of their young children. Many children, particularly low-income children, depend on high-quality early learning settings for school readiness.”⁹

* Funded slots refers to the number of children and pregnant women that are supported by federal Head Start funds in a program at any one time during the program year.



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