

The Heinz Endowments restructured its support of early childhood education into a three-year, \$10 million strategy that elevates child care and early education as priorities – needs brought into sharp relief by the COVID-19 crisis. By Cristina Rouvalis

# EARLY investment

**B**efore the novel coronavirus upended everyone's lives, Shayla Scott would walk every workday with her 3-year-old son, Maverick Laboy, through the colorful, art-filled hallways of the child care center at Hosanna House in Wilksburg Borough, east of Pittsburgh.

They would enter the toddler room where Maverick was greeted by his teachers. Then Ms. Scott would hug her son before leaving for her job, feeling reassured that he was in good hands.

That comforting routine was interrupted this spring when the child care center and other businesses closed their doors because of the pandemic, and Ms. Scott started doing her job as athletic director at The Ellis School, a private school for girls, from home. But she was touched to receive a text from her

son's preschool teacher asking the family how they were faring.

"It was so sweet," she said. Maverick responded with a voice memo telling his teacher how much he missed her and his classmates. He also told her he was doing well with potty training.

"I am really fortunate to be connected to a place like this," Ms. Scott said. "If there is something I am concerned about in my son's development, I have open and clear lines of communication with the teachers."

She also has used the resources they sent her to continue working with her son on cognitive and fine motor skills at home.

The importance of quality early childhood education has been amplified because of the COVID-19 crisis, especially for those on the front lines of the pandemic. But education and human development experts have been touting the value of early childhood education for years. The Heinz Endowments has made early education a priority and announced in



January that it had earmarked \$10 million over the next three years for a variety of early childhood programs.

The foundation also joined a public-private partnership to provide a total of \$500,000 in emergency funding to help meet the child care needs of local families during the pandemic (see “Balancing Act” sidebar).

While the Endowments has supported youth programs for the past 25 years, the new approach is more holistic, combining support for both education and health programs into a strategy to meet the needs of mothers and children from prenatal to age 3.

“We can no longer look at early childhood education without looking at how we can provide the best maternal care and how we create the best environments for infants as well,” said Michelle Figlar, vice president of Learning at the Endowments. “Previously those two things sat separately.”

The program at Hosanna House, a nonprofit organization that offers a range of community services, is one example of the

type of investment high-quality child care requires. Its teachers have bachelor’s degrees in early education, one of the reasons the center has received prestigious accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children. And the child care programming emphasizes social, emotional and intellectual growth.

“We find out if a child is struggling early on,” said Leon Haynes, the organization’s executive director. “Then we can intervene and get them the help they need before they cross the doors to kindergarten.”

Even better, it’s affordable, and will remain so even after Ms. Scott brings her second child, Sloane, 2, once the child care center reopens. A grant from the Endowments helps supplement the public subsidies Hosanna House receives for 94 percent of the families based on income, and the average co-pay is \$23 a day.

Although more public and private dollars have gone to quality preschool programs, there has been a gap in funding for early

education programs geared toward infants and children up to age 3, Ms. Figlar said. Recognition of the importance of early education is rooted in a growing body of scientific research that shows the rapid rate of early brain development.

In infancy, billions of neural connections called synapses form between parts of the brain. Early experiences begin to shape the brain’s architecture, beginning with the areas responsible for vision, hearing, smell and taste, and later, language, cognitive and social skills. If a young child does not receive adequate stimulation, the brain cannot form those neural connections, and the child may lose the opportunity to gain certain skills.

Dr. Judy Cameron, a neuroscientist and professor of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh, compares brain development to the process of building a house.

“The foundation of your house is your senses,” she said. “They get built early. If they don’t, you are going to have problems with reading, problems with motor skills, even problems reading people’s emotions.”

A child who makes connections during those formative years will retain those skills for the rest of their lives. While it is possible to gain skills later in life, they are much harder to learn and are easily lost without constant practice.

Early brain development is also vital for social and emotional skills, said Roberta L. Schomburg, executive director of The Fred Rogers Center. “It is important that children get off to a good start and learn things like self-control. We have to help children learn to manage anger and frustration by setting clear limits but giving them space to talk about what upsets them. They are learning their sense of identity separate from their parents.”

Supporting early education programs is considered a smart investment of educational and human services dollars. Trauma



Renee Rosensteel

Shayla Scott helps her son Maverick Laboy, 3, with his alphabet flash cards.



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Michelle Figlar, vice president of Learning, The Heinz Endowments

and stress during the early years can cause lasting damage. For example, children who grow up in an environment where there is a lot of screaming will be so skilled at detecting anger that they will experience higher rates of cardiovascular disease, stroke, addiction and other problems later in life, Dr. Cameron said.

Early childhood programs are a priority for other foundations, too.

“Studies show that 90 percent of a child’s brain develops by age 5,” said Sally McCrady, president and chair of the PNC Foundation. “We know that the returns on investment when it comes to high-quality early education and school readiness initiatives are significant and long-lasting—impacting our children, our society and the health of our economy for generations to come. That’s why PNC has made it a priority to support high-quality early childhood education through PNC Grow Up Great, our multi-year \$500 million initiative to help children from birth to age 5 develop a lifelong love of learning.”

It’s also crucial to develop early childhood programs for the entire family, experts explained.

“It can’t just be about the child. It’s the relationship with caregivers,” said Dr. Schomburg of The Fred Rogers Center. “Parents are so isolated these days, and they need support. Sometimes their reaction is at an emotional level such as, ‘I hear this child screaming and sometimes go berserk.’ Parents sometimes need the ear of somebody who can offer perspective and strategies.”

**A**mong the programs the Endowments has funded over the years that are being rolled into the \$10 million initiative are those for new mothers, who sometimes feel overwhelmed by the huge demands of parenting.

“Being a parent is hard for everyone but adding poverty to that scenario makes it even more challenging,” Ms. Figlar said.

The COVID-19 crisis has focused much of the child care discussion on immediate needs in the midst of social distancing. But when more direct contact is possible, a variety

of programs have been making a significant difference in the lives of families.

Healthy Start Pittsburgh, for example, offers home visiting support and advocacy designed to reduce poor birth outcomes, end infant mortality and eliminate health disparities. The staff connects expectant or new mothers with community resources that provide assistance in areas such as health care, breastfeeding and parent-building skills. Healthy Start Pittsburgh, a federally funded program, has received \$250,000 in grants from the Endowments to support various programs.

Jada Shirriel, CEO of Healthy Start Pittsburgh, said the home visiting program removed “barriers like transportation, child care and stigma. Everybody needs support on some level. Many of our families have been displaced from their home communities, maybe living 30 to 40 miles from where they grew up, from their families, or even from their jobs—doing the best that they can but oftentimes having to fend for themselves.”

Kate Brennan, director of operations of NurturePA, agreed. “Early motherhood is an extremely vulnerable time,” she said. “When mothers are supported better, they are able to nurture their babies better.

NurturePA connects mothers seeking guidance with more experienced mothers who offer practical counsel. Women who sign up for NurturePA receive weekly texts from mom volunteers on everything from

a crying baby to social isolation. In six years, 100 volunteers with the organization have served almost 800 mothers.

Merett Southall signed up for NurturePA five years ago when her third child was born. Though she was an experienced mother, she found it helpful to get texts from her mentor about activities for her children or an upcoming Mommy and Me event.

Now a mother of four who lives in Ben Avon, Ms. Southall is a volunteer who texts six mothers once a week and matches her support with their needs. For a first-time mom, Ms. Southall might send them texts about how the baby is sleeping or breastfeeding. When one mother expressed shame that she had switched from breastfeeding to the bottle, Ms. Southall reassured her that she had done that with her first child and he came out just fine.

“Even though I don’t know the person, I try to be relatable. I try to make moms feel comfortable,” she said.

That empathy continued during the stress of the coronavirus outbreak. As she received reports of children complaining of cabin fever and missing their friends, Ms. Southall suggested indoor activities such as building a fort or tunnel or car wash with everyday household items. Then one of the mothers shared her personal worries about the pandemic.

“She said her anxiety was at an all-time high now,” Ms. Southall said. “I told her I felt

the same way, and it was totally normal, and that made her feel more comfortable.”

When the mother’s anxiety spiked, Ms. Southall asked her if she considered talking to a therapist or a medical professional.

In addition to its program for new mothers, NurturePA has started a texting program for women with substance abuse issues, in partnership with POWER — Pennsylvania Organization for Women in Early Recovery. The Endowments awarded it \$50,000 for their text support program for women in recovery.

Other Endowments grantees that will receive support as part of its early childhood initiative include programs for the whole family, such as the Latino Community Center based in Downtown Pittsburgh, which will become the lead fiscal agent for the Latino Family Center in Hazelwood. The family center will hold workshops on subjects such as parenting, early childhood development and English instruction for parents.

The family center also is offering a federal home-visiting program called

ParentChild+, a bilingual effort designed to teach skills to Spanish-speaking parents that will benefit their children when they learn English later.

A child care specialist was hired in July and will begin working with families in August. Because of the pandemic, the plan is to provide initial visits in person and subsequent ones virtually, said Emily Blair, the center’s director of educational programs.

Ms. Blair, who also will serve as site coordinator for the local ParentChild+ program, is receiving guidance from the national office of ParentChild+ on how to proceed in light of the COVID-19 crisis. But she said overall the objectives of the program are the same, even if some of the methods may be different depending on how conditions progress.

“When students don’t get early childhood education or go to preschool, they often start kindergarten with a gap,” Ms. Blair said. “Our goal is to give our students a boost.”<sup>h</sup>

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Merett Southall, NurturePA volunteer



Merett Southall, who uses her smartphone to text supportive advice to young mothers, shows the device to two of her children, Trey, 3, left, and Kai, 5, right.



# Balancing ACT

**Local nonprofits are providing help to families scrambling to find child care during the pandemic.**  
**By Cristina Rouvalis**

**W**ith 80 percent of the child care centers closed in Allegheny County since early spring because of the coronavirus pandemic, many parents of young children have had to rely on their relatives and become creative as they adjust to a new stressful work-home balance during the crisis.

"What we are hearing is that a lot of parents are leaning on their natural, built-in support of their families," said Cara Ciminillo, executive director of Trying Together, a nonprofit that supports and advocates for the care and education of young children.

"Some parents are just juggling their day. 'I will work in the morning while you watch the kids. You do your work in the afternoon.' The question is: How long can they do it? Especially if the economy opens up and their spouse gets called back to work."

Ms. Ciminillo described how some parents are feeling the strain of balancing work phone calls with toddlers or preschoolers who demand constant attention.

"We are hearing, 'Maybe this isn't going to work. I have two children and I work full-time and I am expected to be the teacher too, and my husband has been called back to work because he is an essential worker. How long can I do this?'"

Of the 650 regulated child care providers, about 135 were open in late April. Sixty of them were home-based. Because they are small — often with six kids or fewer — they did not have to apply to the state for waivers to stay open. Another 75 child care centers applied for waivers so they could serve essential workers in the medical, grocery and other industries that kept employees on the job.

Other child care centers that are on standby have offered to open, but they have not seen the demand.

"We were preparing for the worst of circumstances. But most people are finding their own solutions," said Amy Malen, assistant deputy director of the Office of Community Services of the Allegheny County Department of Human Services.

The county Department of Human Services, Trying Together, and the Alliance for Infants and Toddlers support the work of the Early Learning Resource Center (ELRC) for Allegheny County to help families find and pay for child care. Parents who are under 200 percent of the federal poverty level can apply for and receive child care subsidy from the ELRC, which distributes these subsidies on behalf of the state.

The ELRC can refer parents to open centers and help guide them through the process of applying for aid. Trying Together is partnering with the Allegheny County Department of Human Services and the Early Learning Resource Center, Region 5, to run Allegheny Child Care, an online search tool that enables users to look for operating child care centers and identify those with open spaces for children. The digital tool, which is still in the pilot phase, received funding support from The Heinz Endowments and other local foundations, which are part of a public-private partnership that has provided a combined total of \$500,000 to help strengthen the region's child care sector in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. In addition to supporting the Allegheny Child Care online tool, the money allows the county's Early Childhood Education Fund to make emergency grants totaling approximately \$400,000 directly to early child care providers and education caregivers.

Trying Together also offers resources to parents on how to interact with children at home — everything from developmentally appropriate parenting to questions about health and screen time.

Ms. Ciminillo often encourages parents to do free play with their children, the least expensive and most accessible way to interact.

"One of my favorites is to dump out all your recyclables — toilet paper rolls and old milk cartons and egg cartons. Use them for loose, unstructured play," she said. "The child guides the materials and uses them in any way their imagination takes them." **h**