



Early Childhood Matters, To Businesses And Community

To sustain a year round workforce, many agree early childhood education is essential

By Carol K. Dumas

When Fred and Lindsay Bierwirth, parents of two daughters, were planning their fitness center in Chatham, they insisted on a childcare component. Employees at Chatham Works receive free childcare and clients can use the daycare for only \$8 for three hours, an unheard of fee since most private daycare sets young families back as much as a mortgage payment.

“It’s the biggest money losing venture,” acknowledges Lindsay. “From a business standpoint, it wasn’t the best use of space, but from a community standpoint it’s invaluable.”

The lack of affordable daycare/early childhood education is the center of a perfect storm, especially on Cape Cod.

The high cost of housing and lack of employment opportunities have already stymied the growth of the peninsula’s workforce and impacted businesses. Add to that the cost of having a child in daycare or a private preschool program at around \$1,500 a month and the sum total represents why Cape Cod is having a big problem attracting a year-round workforce, especially young people.

Much has been written and many have talked about the lack and affordability of daycare and early childhood programs in the Cape and Plymouth regions, but few solutions have been offered or implemented. Meanwhile, businesses have been feeling the impact with

employees forced to take time off after childbirth or missing work because there’s no one to take care of the kids. The trickle-down effect of stressors in families struggling to make a living has been linked to other societal issues such as substance abuse and domestic violence.

“What I’m hearing is that working adults with children are drowning,” says Lauren Barker, CEO of Cape Cod Young Professionals and a mother of two young children. “They are paying as much as \$600 a week per child for day care. It’s as much or more than a mortgage payment. CCYP approaches childcare as a lens for young professionals who want to start families here on the Cape.”

CCYP, which is committed to attracting a year-round workforce, broached this issue through its Child Care Policy Position Paper, which recommends program models to help employers provide more child care resources for employees and supporting national, state and local policies that can reduce or mitigate the high cost of childcare.

"Across all solutions, CCYP emphasizes the need for high quality child care options that provide working parents and caregivers to confidently enter, and remain in the workforce year-round," the paper stated.

How that can be accomplished is the challenge.

A Community Need

Early childhood education and day care are interchangeable terms because studies have shown the correlation between them. From birth to age 4 is considered the most critical phase of a person's development.

"Because of their family environments, too many children come to school ill-prepared to learn. They lack language skills, social skills, and motivation," wrote Isabel V. Sawhill, a senior fellow in Economic Studies at the Brookings Institution, working in the Center on Children and Families and on the Future of the Middle Class Initiative. "Almost all experts now agree that a preschool experience or its first cousin—high quality, educationally-oriented child care—is one of the most effective strategies for improving later school performance."

Sawhill is an advocate of Universal Early Childhood Education, publicly funded programs for under age 5 children.

While attracting young professionals is key to building a permanent workforce on Cape Cod, the still largely seasonal economy is filled with self-employed parents in service industries who struggle even more to make ends meet if they have to find childcare. Think of the landscaper, the waitstaff at a restaurant, house cleaners. When they miss a day of work they miss a crucial day's pay.

"There's a widespread lack of concern that childcare is a community need... we're fostering the next generation," says Stacie Peugh, CEO of Cape Cod YMCA, which offers daycare and early childhood programs. The YMCA recently published its own Community Needs Assessment, available on their website.

Peugh attended a YMCA conference where

the topic of daycare programs was discussed among CEOs. "Only 30 percent of Y CEOs are women," a significant factor, she points out. "The discussion was about dollars, the revenue. 'How much money does your Y earn on voucher education?'"

"Advocacy is a number one priority," she continues. "The voice has to be heard, over and over again. And louder and louder. Where's the March on Washington for early education and its importance in society? Until it's publicly funded, it's going to continue to be a problem."

Another issue can be the lack of daycare or early childhood programs, particularly on the Lower Cape, where the year-round population is less. Not all available daycare or preschool programs fit into work schedules, they usually end at 5 p.m. In addition, early childhood education is a low-wage field. Cape Cod

Community College, however, started offering grants last fall to students pursuing early childhood education and this spring, 24 candidates will receive credentials.

Cape Cod Children's Place, based in Eastham, has been a strong advocate for families with young children on the Lower Cape. The organization, which offers early childhood education and parental support programs, recognizes that "healthy families are a reflection of strong communities" and have partnered with local schools, libraries, community businesses and agencies.

One successful partnership has been the SeaBabies program with Seaman's Bank in Wellfleet.

When she was expecting her daughter 21 years ago, Seamen's President and CEO Lori Meads was asked by Cape Cod Children's Place to participate in a focus group to better understand the needs of new mothers and examine if businesses were losing employees due to maternity. The Children's Place even-



tually established a daycare center called Sea Babies at the Wellfleet Council on Aging. The bank agreed to help subsidize the operation if it wasn't fully enrolled. The bank now pays 65 percent of the cost of daycare for bank employees who use the center. Now there's a waiting list every year. The number of bank employees who use the benefit varies - at times it's as much as six.

Seventy percent of the staff at Seamen's are women and Meads feels that is partly due to the bank's commitment to childcare.

Businesses Finding Solutions

While employee absenteeism can affect business productivity and impact its customer service, the daycare/early childhood issue can also affect an employee when they are working.

"From a productivity perspective, certainly absenteeism related to dependent care can be an issue, but so is presenteeism; the employee is at work but not able to focus on work or has

to make calls and send emails related to their dependents," says Allison McEachern, Chief People Officer at Rogers/Gray.

The insurance company has 197 employees, with offices on the Cape and South Shore. Like many employees, McEachern knows the struggles families face balancing work with child-rearing.

"From personal experience, I know how hard it is to work full time and have three kids at home, with one who has cerebral palsy which complicates daycare," says McEachern. "While my kids are teenagers now it was a struggle for most of their life to coordinate care and balance work and time with them. I was fortunate to have support from my parents, otherwise it would have been even more difficult but not everyone has the support system."

The company at first considered offering

a daycare space in its Kingston office, but it didn't work out. They have implemented other options, however, including flexible work hours for those with children under age 10; a remote work option; and "a robust amount of vacation, sick and personal time." Last year they rolled out a paid parental leave for primary and secondary parents which allows the primary parent to have 12 weeks of leave following the birth or adoption of a child.

An added layer of support includes the Employee Assistance Program which provides resources and tools for dealing with dependent care issues.

"We have centralized many of our processes and created some redundancy in roles via cross training and as a result when there are absences there is a backup plan that fully supports the role; this has had a huge impact."

Rogers/Gray also created several "floating" positions that travel to various offices to act as back up during vacations and other time off.

"We encourage employees to take the time they [have a] need to focus on their dependents," says McEachern. "I have heard a few cases of employees partnering up and assisting each other with dependent care during school vacation weeks; they switch off who stays home and watches each other's kids. I would love to help the employees organize this a bit to allow for more support for more employees, we may see that in the coming 12 to 18 months."

Cape Cod 5 has also addressed the issue.

"Cape Cod 5 is keenly aware of the critical issue of accessible and affordable child care in our region and the impact it has on the workforce," commented Dorothy Savarese, chair and CEO. "As a local employer, we have developed a number of benefit programs to help subsidize the cost of child and dependent care for our employees and their families. Cape Cod 5 also considers this need in our community giving, supporting several initiatives over the past year that aim to assist working parents and individuals with child care needs."

The Child and Elder Care Benefit Program assists eligible employees in providing essential care for their qualified dependents, including reimbursement options for expenses incurred for child and/or elder care services that occur during working business hours. Thirty-seven Cape Cod

5 employees are currently enrolled in the program.

The bank also offers a Dependent Care



Flexible Spending Reimbursement and premium annual membership to care.com.

Cape Cod 5 also helps out working families through philanthropic efforts. Last year, the bank gave \$63,228 to child care and daycare service organizations and programs in 2019. In addition, the Cape Cod 5 Foundation approved a \$50,000 grant to the YMCA Cape Cod to help fund their new child care program in Hyannis, making Cape Cod 5 the largest private funder of the project, which also received a \$1 million grant from the state.

Lindsay and Fred Bierwirth were part of a local initiative called Chatham 365, a task force looking for solutions to bridge the gap between young people living in a community with one of the oldest populations in the state. They didn't think twice about adding a daycare component to their business, Chatham Works.


The brightly colored, toy-filled room at Chatham Works has been well-received by both parents working out and employees, who have found benefits beyond affordability.

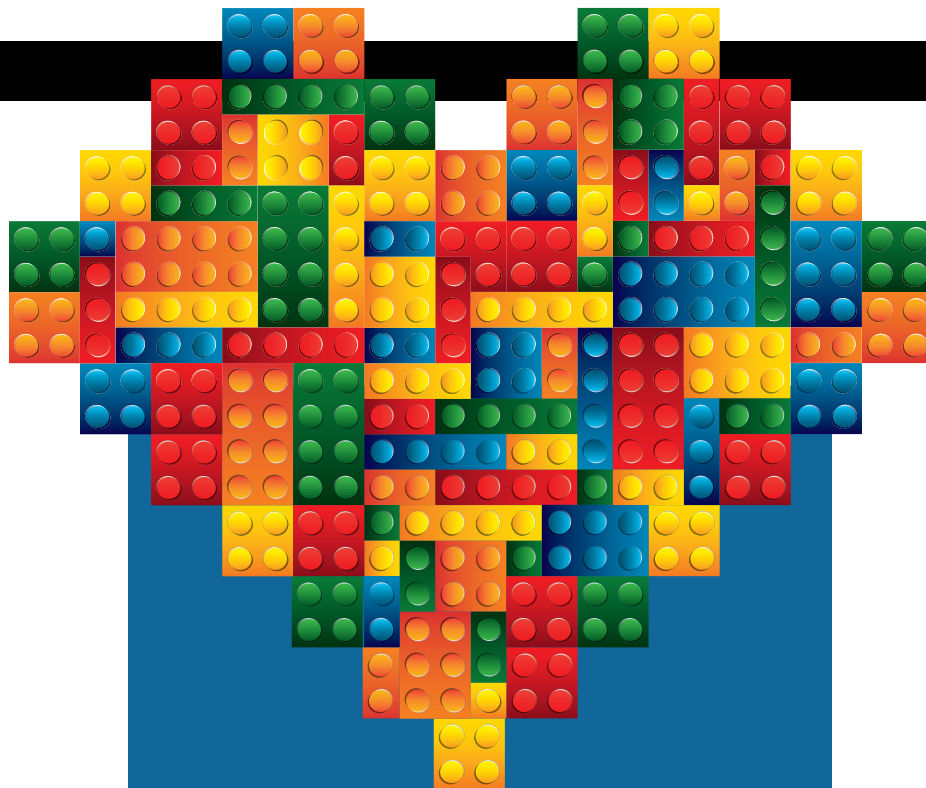
"I walked in one day and they were reading to my daughter," says Alex Tuckerman, a trainer and father to a 14-month-old daughter. "We talked about getting childcare but it's so expensive. For me it was petrifying being a first-time dad. My wife was working, but my job here allowed me to see how others parented, how other people treated my child and how children interacted with each other. I've learned a lot."

State And Local Initiatives

Some towns have been ahead of others in terms of providing universal early childhood education, including Wellfleet, which has had a program in place for five years, and Provincetown, which last spring funded "Wee Care," a day care program for infants and toddlers at the former Veterans Memorial Elementary School.

State Sen. Julian Cyr says these models have inspired other towns to recognize the importance of early childhood education with publicly funded programs. Mashpee has expanded its pre-K system and Eastham is also considering that option.

"Many parents are cobbling it together, with friends or family pitching in, but not everyone has grandparents living nearby to help out," says Cyr. "From a policy perspective, we need to recognize that in order to sustain year-round communities, where the median age is among the highest in the state, we need universal pre-K and childcare. We should do everything we can to retain our working families." 



Resources

Cape Cod Children's Place

11 Balwic Rd., No. Eastham
capecodchildrensplace.com

Child Care Network

372 North St, Hyannis

The Children's Center

115 Sisson Rd, Harwichport
hech.org

Cape Cod YMCA

2245 Iyannough Rd, West Barnstable
ymcacapecod.org

Old Colony YMCA

Brockton, E. Bridgewater, Plymouth,
Taunton, Middleboro, N. Easton
oldcoloniymca.org

South Shore Stars

200 Middle St., East Weymouth
Southshorestars.org