# The Smartest Investment

## Expanding Access to High-Quality Early Childhood Education in Bexar County

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## Executive Summary

The first five years of life shape who we become - our ability to learn, relate, and contribute to society. Yet, in Bexar County, thousands of children - both typically developing and those with developmental delays or disabilities - miss out on high-quality early childhood education (ECE) during this critical window. The result is a growing opportunity gap with far-reaching consequences for families, employers, and the community's long-term economic health.

The IDD Champions Community Survey of over 800 stakeholders, paired with local early education and economic data, helps explain the Key Numbers at a Glance and the urgency behind them. This white paper presents the economic implications of limited access to quality early education, the systemic barriers that prevent enrollment, and the need for collaborative solutions.

### Key Numbers at a Glance

| 13% | 36% | $9,000+ | $4-$9 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Young children in Bexar County experiencing developmental delays or disabilities | Children under age five currently enrolled in licensed early education | Average annual cost of full-time toddler care in the region | Long-term economic return for every dollar invested in ECE |

## Introduction

Early childhood education is one of the most powerful tools for ensuring that every child, regardless of background or ability, enters school ready to learn. Research consistently shows that children who attend high-quality early education programs demonstrate stronger academic performance, improved social-emotional skills, and higher rates of high school graduation and employment later in life.

In Bexar County, where nearly one in four children under age five lives in poverty, access to early learning opportunities can be the difference between future success and ongoing struggle. For children with developmental delays or disabilities, inclusive early education settings can foster growth, independence, and the vital early identification of support needs. For typically developing children, early education builds a foundation for lifelong resilience. Unfortunately, access remains severely uneven due to prohibitive costs and geographic constraints, creating immense consequences for both human potential and regional economic stability.

# Economic Overview of Missed Opportunities

**For Children with Developmental Delays and Disabilities:** Approximately 13% of young children in Bexar County experience developmental delays or disabilities. Early, high-quality education settings help identify concerns sooner and deliver targeted interventions that drastically improve long-term outcomes. Without this access, these children often enter kindergarten behind their peers, requiring much more intensive - and expensive - remedial services later.

**For Typically Developing Children:** The benefits of quality early learning extend to all children. Studies confirm that children attending high-quality ECE programs are 25% more likely to graduate high school, four times more likely to hold a college degree, and significantly less likely to require special education or rely on public assistance in adulthood.

**The Broader Economic Impact:** Yet, only 36% of children under age five in Bexar County are enrolled in licensed programs. When children are not enrolled, parents - especially mothers - are frequently forced to reduce work hours or exit the workforce entirely, resulting in lost local income and reduced productivity. Employers face severe recruitment and retention challenges, while schools bear the heavy financial burden of costly remediation. Ultimately, every dollar strategically invested in early education yields an incredible return of $4 to $9 in societal benefits.

# The Economic Cost of Inaction

Failing to invest in early childhood education costs everyone. Each year that children go without access to affordable, high-quality early learning, the community permanently loses future productivity, academic achievement, and economic stability. The Perry Preschool Project and the Heckman Curve clearly demonstrate that the earlier we invest in children, the greater the economic return. Conversely, delayed or insufficient investment leads directly to skyrocketing costs in public education, healthcare, and social services. Inaction today guarantees exponentially higher spending tomorrow.

### System Pressure Snapshot: Barriers to Access

- Severe affordability gaps: Full-time child care for one toddler averages over $9,000 per year - nearly equal to in-state college tuition.
- Unsustainable budget burden: For families earning below the median income, care costs consume more than 20% of their annual household budget, far exceeding the federal affordability benchmark of 7%.
- Workforce shortages: The early education sector is experiencing a severe shortage of qualified professionals, limiting operating capacity.
- Lack of inclusive settings: Families face a severe lack of inclusive classrooms equipped to accommodate children with developmental needs alongside their peers.
- Mismatched hours and limited supply: Rigid program hours and child care deserts make participation impossible for many working families.

### Why It Matters

Early childhood education is both a developmental strategy and an economic strategy. When children have access to high-quality, inclusive early learning, they are more likely to enter school ready to learn, families are better able to remain in the workforce, and Bexar County benefits from stronger long-term educational and economic outcomes.

# Promising Solutions

Based on proven models and local needs, implementing the following five strategic interventions can directly address Bexar County's early education challenges while generating significant economic returns:

**1**

### Expand Access to Subsidized and Sliding-Scale Programs

- Increase state and local funding to help working families afford high-quality early education. Prioritization must be placed on children under age three, the period when brain development is most rapid and critical.

**2**

### Invest in the Early Education Workforce

- Raise wages, provide training incentives, and create viable career pathways for early childhood educators. High-quality outcomes depend directly on retaining skilled, stable, and motivated teachers.

**3**

### Foster Public-Private Partnerships for Expansion

- Encourage and incentivize local businesses to invest in on-site or subsidized child care as a core employee benefit. Corporate engagement stabilizes the local workforce while supporting child well-being.

**4**

### Advance Universal Pre-K and Inclusive Early Learning Models

- Expand access to full-day pre-kindergarten programs designed to serve both typically developing children and those with developmental needs side-by-side in high-quality, inclusive environments.

**5**

### Improve Community Resource Navigation and Awareness

- Connect families to available programs more efficiently through tools like the San Antonio Community Resource Directory (SACRD) and coordinated outreach via pediatricians, faith communities, and local employers.

# Policy Recommendations

The following policy actions would help Bexar County move from fragmented access toward a more coordinated early learning system that supports children, families, employers, and providers.

1

## Increase State and Local Investment in Early Childhood Programs

- Expand access to affordable, high-quality early education, with priority for children under age three and families facing the greatest cost barriers.
- **Why it matters:** Early investment reduces later remediation costs and strengthens school readiness before gaps widen.

2

## Create Local Tax Incentives for Employer-Supported Child Care

- Encourage businesses to invest in child care benefits, reserved slots, care stipends, or direct partnerships with early education providers.
- **Why it matters:** Child care access is a workforce issue; employer-supported solutions can reduce absenteeism, turnover, and workforce exits.

3

## Develop a Countywide Early Education Workforce Strategy

- Improve compensation, credentialing pathways, training incentives, and retention supports for early childhood educators.
- **Why it matters:** Program expansion depends on a stable, skilled workforce capable of delivering high-quality and inclusive care.

4

## Align Early Education Systems Across Public Partners

- Coordinate funding streams, eligibility rules, referral pathways, and data systems across city, county, school district, and community programs.
- **Why it matters:** Families should not have to navigate disconnected systems to find support during the most critical years of development.

5

## Promote Inclusive Early Learning Models

- Establish financial incentives and technical assistance for programs that successfully serve children with developmental delays or disabilities alongside their peers.
- **Why it matters:** Inclusive classrooms improve access, reduce isolation, and support earlier identification of developmental needs.

# Action Steps for Stakeholders

### Community Members

Advocate for early education investment as a primary community and economic priority. Support local child care centers through volunteering, material donations, or facilitating employer partnerships.

### Employers

Explore employer-sponsored child care options, care stipends, or flexible work arrangements for parents. Partner directly with local early education providers to offer dedicated scholarships or slots for employee families.

### Philanthropic Organizations

Invest heavily in physical infrastructure and workforce development for early education providers. Provide seed funding for innovative, inclusive, and bilingual early learning pilot models.

### Policy Leaders

Prioritize early childhood funding line items in local and state government budgets. Strengthen civic data systems to rigorously track long-term outcomes and equity across all funded early education programs.

# Conclusion

The case for early childhood education is clear - and urgent. The earliest years of life fundamentally shape the trajectory of our children, the success of our school systems, and the vitality of our economy. By boldly expanding access to high-quality early education, we ensure that every child - regardless of ability, family income, or ZIP code - has the genuine opportunity to thrive.

Bexar County stands at a crossroads. We can choose to continue reacting to the immense, compounding downstream costs of underinvestment, or we can act now - strategically and collaboratively - to give every child the strong start they deserve. The smartest investment we can possibly make is in our youngest learners.

### Bottom Line for Early Learning

Expanding access to high-quality, inclusive early childhood education gives children a stronger start while supporting working families and strengthening Bexar County's future workforce.

## Call to Action

Expand access to high-quality early education now. Strategic investment can support working families, strengthen school readiness, reduce future remediation costs, and build a more resilient Bexar County economy.

**Coalition Statement:** The IDD Champions Coalition includes Brighton Center, The MAC, Respite Care of San Antonio, The Arc of San Antonio, and SA Life Academy.