

# Quality daycare out of reach for many

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Nearly half of Durham's childcare facilities are considered high-quality, but they're hard to find in poorer areas and often out of reach for those who need them.

Reducing the cost of high-quality childcare will be crucial for the nearly half of Durham children age 0-5 in low-income households, according to Durham's Partnership for Children. Monthly fees can top \$1,000.

Early education advocates regularly cite the connection between quality childcare and school success.

"Not just that they know their ABC's, but [that] they can stand in line and be good in class," said Angelica Oberleithner, the partnership's acting executive director. "Quality early center experiences lead to the growth and development in the key areas of language, literacy, health and physical development, emotional and social development and cognition. What children need in order to be successful learners."

The partnership and downtown Durham leaders released a report about child care options for downtown workers last week. Downtown has 16 licensed childcare facilities, 11 of which are considered high-quality, with a vacancy rate of just 7 percent. Meanwhile, the downtown workforce grew 268 percent between 1993 and 2010.

Proposed solutions include government incentives to bring more childcare facilities downtown, businesses paying for childcare slots and having several businesses support a child center.

"Overall, the team found that the current supply of high-quality child care within the downtown area is woefully inadequate, with licensed child care capacity for only about 500 children and virtually no vacancies," the report said. "This forces downtown workers to seek out other childcare programs further from their employment, which increases travel time and makes balancing family life with work responsibilities all the more challenging."

## East Durham gap

The challenges are extreme in East Durham, which has only one five-star and three four-star centers out of 13 licensed facilities, according to the partnership.

The partnership looked at converting the E.D. Mickle Recreation Center on North Alston Avenue into a childcare facility, but that would require major renovations with no room for expansion. For now, efforts should focus on increasing access to the facilities that exist, said David Reese, director of the East Durham Children's Initiative.

"We have to look at how to increase subsidies and scholarships," he said. "When we look at wage earners in East Durham, at \$9 an hour, it's difficult to justify within your family budget \$1,200 a month for child care."

Over half of all Durham children under age 6 live in homes where both parents work, said Linda Chappel, senior vice-president of Triangle Area Child Care Resource and Referral Services. The public is well-informed regarding the importance of K-12 education, but not when it comes to the time between birth and kindergarten, she said.

"We have to grapple with this huge issue of the investment we make in our young children," she said. "The reality is that for many families, they select childcare and they don't really know what is going on during the day with their child."

### **Rising stars**

Durham's 359 licensed child care centers had an average rating of 3.61 in 2008-09, an increase from 2.52 in 2001, according to the partnership. High-quality centers are those with four or five star rankings.

About 57 percent of Durham children age 0-5 are in four- or five-star programs. Of those on subsidies, 69 percent are in high-quality facilities, compared to 36 percent in 2002. The system is based on space, child to teacher ratio and the learning curriculum, among other factors.

But another barrier to quality care is the business itself. Most workers have at least an associate's degree but very few have degrees in early childhood education. Wages are so low that 40 percent of early education teachers needed food stamps or other forms of public assistance.

"Childcare providers frequently earn low wages, which makes it hard for the workforce to access education and improve their skill levels," Chappel said. "It's all about teaching and learning, how the teacher learns to be intentional in their work with children. It's not just about keeping children safe."

Increasing the number of four- and five-star facilities will take increased private and public funding as well as a greater understanding from the public, said Kara Turner, owner of Primary Colors Early Learning Center

"They think childcare is babysitting, and they think that learning begins at kindergarten," she said. "People think that when a child gets to kindergarten, that's when they need to read and write. They're miseducated about what's needed for their child and that 0-5 age range is so important."