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## Features

### The first school: expanding access to quality daycare in Detroit

CLAIRE CHARLTON | MONDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2016



LAUREN MONTGOMERY

The daycare center. It's noisy, bright, teeming with chaotic activity. Of course, it's a place where infants and toddlers are cared for while their parents are at work. But it's so much more.

A quality daycare center is a child's very first school, a place where she can build trusting relationships with caring adults and peers. It's a place that, in the best of circumstances, can provide the foundation on which all future learning grows.

Legislators, educators, and other stakeholders are beginning to grasp that daycare experiences are the earliest form of childhood education—a fact that child development experts have long known.

"The research has been there, and we have been working a long time at making

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### What does quality childcare

A [poll released in October 2016](#) by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health found that close to 90 percent of parents believe the quality level of their child's care is very good or excellent. Child development experts think otherwise. So how do you find quality care in Detroit?

the public aware of the importance of those early years and the long-term impact on children's growth, development, and later school success," says Anna Miller, early childhood education lecturer at Wayne State University.

To some, daycare is just "babysitting." But the connection between education and care is inseparable, says Dr. Claire Vallotton, associate professor of human development and family studies at Michigan State University.

"For children under five, the care piece is so critical and not to be contrasted with education," says Vallotton. "Children this age cannot learn unless they feel safe and secure in their environments and relationships. So much is based on the quality of the relationships."

### In short supply

Denise Smith is the vice president for early learning at [Excellent Schools Detroit](#) (ESD), a coalition of civic, philanthropic, and community members that works to ensure all Detroit children receive an excellent education. According to Smith, parents assess early-learning programs on three criteria. "It's like a three-legged stool for parents: quality, cost, and access," she says. "There may be a quality program on the other side of Detroit, but if I don't have transportation, it's essentially nonexistent."

A [study](#) conducted for [The Kresge Foundation](#) found that across many neighborhoods, early childhood care is in short supply.

Overall, 40 percent of the 56,000 Detroit children below kindergarten age who need child care have access to a slot in a licensed or registered childcare facility. This leaves a service gap of about 28,000 slots, 45 percent of which are concentrated in the 10 Detroit communities of Chadsey, Rouge, Vernor Junction, Finney, Burbank, Nolan, Mt. Olivet, Brooks, Denby, and Pershing.

"There is a huge need across the landscape," says Smith. "It's amplified here, because early childhood educators have not been supported to do their best work."

### Focusing on quality

The good news is there are many efforts in place, from community and corporate initiatives to government and grant programs, to improve both the quality of and the access to care for Detroit's youngest residents.

Support for early educators is high on the priority list for ESD.

Research conducted by Smith and her team found that communication and collaboration between early educators and elementary teachers is crucial. Unfortunately, that practice is virtually nonexistent in Detroit.

"Every state has quality rating in systems and childcare centers that are evaluated. It's voluntary and reinforced. Parents can look for those that have been evaluated," says Dr. Claire Vallotton, associate professor of development and family studies at Michigan State University.

Michigan's quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) is called [Great Start](#) and based on accepted standards for infant and toddler programs using model [quality indicators](#) in five categories: staff qualifications, family and community partnerships, management, and environment.

As of 2015, 48 percent of licensed registered providers in Detroit participate in the QRIS program. Eighty-nine percent received a rating of three stars on a scale of zero to five, according to a [study](#) of early childhood education.

Quality is so important because it's a leader in providing early intervention for children who demonstrate need for programs like [Early On](#), according to Vallotton.

"At a high quality center, these services take place right in the center. Not just trained when to recognize that they are needed," she says. "The early educators recognize the potential delay, they can start working with the family to support the child needs, rather than wait until kindergarten needing special services."

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In addition to facilitating these connections, ESD provides coach-based learning for everyone involved with children through its [Early Educators Excel](#), or E3, program, which focuses on language, literacy, and social-emotional development.

"E3 is specifically designed to provide professional development and learning experiences to teachers, parents, coaches, mentors, and administrators so they can improve their practices, both in the home and school environment," says E3 program director Jillian Webb.

Parents in Detroit want what their peers in Bloomfield Hills and Rochester have: quality care for children in a clean, safe, welcoming environment. [Matrix Human Services](#) (MHS) is bringing those services to Detroit.

As the largest of five Michigan grantees in a [nationwide Obama administration initiative](#) towards Early Head Start programs, MHS offers early childcare to low-income students across Detroit. Childcare fees are paid through a subsidy from the State of Michigan and federal [Head Start](#) dollars go toward quality improvements, including classroom resources and staff credentialing.

"This program will give parents choices and opportunities for their children," says Kathleen Coakley, director of Early Head Start/Child Care Partnership at MHS. Matrix supports seven family childcare homes and 17 centers serving children from birth to age five through [Early Head Start](#) and Head Start.

MHS also provides business development, marketing, and operations support for partner childcare providers through the nonprofit [First Children's Finance](#).

"We want people to know that childcare is a viable business in the inner city neighborhood," Coakley says.

Half of the current 42 enrollees at [Lil Brilliant Mindz](#) on Shoemaker Street in Detroit receive Early Head Start services. A partner with MHS, Lil Brilliant Mindz

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provides [HighScope](#) play-based learning curriculum. "When kids go to kindergarten after a HighScope program, they do well," says Angela Hayes, the center's owner and director. "They can write, know their colors and shapes, and some can even do basic math. Most know what kindergarteners should know."

### Motor City Match grants development dollars



Angela Hayes, owner of Lil Brilliant Mindz

One Detroit grantor, Motor City Match, has recognized both the need for quality early childhood education and the validity of childcare as a thriving business.

Lil Brilliant Mindz was one of three Detroit childcare centers awarded grants from business challenge group [Motor City Match](#). In July 2016, the center received \$30,000 in a matching grant to add 15,000 square feet to its existing 4,700 square feet. The center can now accommodate 150 children, from infants to preschoolers, plus a latchkey program, bus transportation, and extra late hours to accommodate parents' shift schedules.

New startup [AmazE-EnJoyment](#) gathered personal equity, a business loan, and a \$50,000 matching grant from Motor City Match to construct a new childcare center in Greater New Straight Street Baptist Church on John R. between Eight Mile and E. State Fair. When complete in late winter 2017, the center will welcome 72 children from infants to age five and will feature transportation, cooking classes, an indoor climbing wall, and a partnership with the [Wayne State School of Weekend Music](#) for whole-family enrichment activities.

"There's a lot of blight here," says Collette Gulley-Reaves, owner and CEO of AmazE EnJoyment. "With Motor City Match, we'll be able to partner with working parents and lower income parents and expose their children to the activities of quality daycare ... Now they'll have a service right here in their community so they don't have to go across town."



A third childcare grant winner, [Al-Wali Child Care Center](#) on Conant St. in Detroit, received a \$10,000 award in January 2016.

These three grantees presented business plans that revitalize community corridors, reactivate vacant space, and contribute significantly to the communities they serve, according to Anthony Askew, program manager with Motor City Match.

"These are good businesses and strong models," Askew says.

### **Caring for children is smart for Detroit's future**

The measure of a city's vitality is the support available to grow and maintain strong families, says Miller, who also serves as executive director of the Wayne State University College of Education [Early Childhood Center](#) and the [Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute](#) Early Childhood Center.

She feels optimistic about the many early education-focused initiatives that are forming.

"We've done a wonderful job attracting business back into Detroit and some understand the importance of investing in young children and families," says Miller. "It's the message we have to send about the importance of laying the critical foundations for our future workforce. These are the children who will eventually be making decisions about our city, our state, our country."

In addition to all the new daycare centers opening in Detroit, a brand new civic partnership kicked off late this fall with the intent to strengthen and align early educational offerings to all of the city's children. [Hope Starts Here](#) is a collaboration between the [W.K. Kellogg](#) and Kresge foundation, and will include more than 100 community leaders sharing wisdom about what young children need to succeed socially and academically.

"We'll be looking at how we provide quality care and education and support for young children and families of Detroit, and how to make a coordinated system," says Miller. "It's really exciting because they are bringing people from different focus areas to the table."

Workforce development, community collaboration, and quality practices are among the areas of exploration and will gather expert advice from early childhood, business, parents, grandparents and community groups.

"I'm excited by this," says Miller. "I think the combination of players is really going to move things forward. We are at a point in time now that people understand that a city can be reborn, but unless it supports children and families, it won't be as much of a success.

"We're really looking at how do we secure the future of Detroit."

Askew of Motor City Match echoes Miller's sentiments. "It's an outstanding time

to do business in Detroit. There are great projects happening, not only in the central business district, but citywide. Supporting strong, neighborhood-based businesses will play an essential role in our city's ability to sustain the growth we're experiencing."

*This article is part of both the Michigan Nightlight and Motor City Match series.*

*Michigan Nightlight is a series of stories about the programs and people that positively impact the lives of Michigan kids. It is made possible with funding from the [W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#). Read more in the series [here](#).*

*Motor City Match is a program that connects new and expanding businesses with Detroit's quality real estate opportunities, providing them with funding and tools to fuel the city's entrepreneurial revolution. Learn more at [www.mortorcitymatch.com](http://www.mortorcitymatch.com).*

*All photos by [Lauren Montgomery](#).*

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