

Economic Impact of the Elizabeth B. Ballard Community Center

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Nicole Brown – University of Kansas MSW

Abstract

Early childhood education (ECE) and family support services are widely recognized as high-return public investments with significant economic and social benefits. This paper examines the economic impact of the Ballard Center in Lawrence, Kansas, focusing on its integrated model of affordable early childhood education, quality nutrition, and community support services. Drawing data from the national, state, and local level, this analysis highlights the Ballard Center's role in improving school readiness, increasing workforce participation, reducing public system costs, and promoting long-term economic mobility. Evidence suggests that high-quality programs like what is offered at the Ballard Center yield an annual return of 7%, with a lifetime return on investment of over 600%. Research also examines how access to childcare and community services can significantly improve employment and income outcomes. These findings emphasize the role that the Ballard Center plays as a social service provider and contributor to local economic growth.

Introduction

Investment in early childhood education and community-based services is a well-established strategy for promoting long-term economic growth and reducing public expenditures. High-quality early childhood education (ECE) programs improve educational attainment, reduce reliance on social services, and increase workforce participation over time (McCoy et al., 2017). The Elizabeth B. Ballard Community Center (The Ballard Center) exemplifies this approach through its mission to partner with individuals and families to achieve stability through early childhood education and needs-based services; while also cultivating a strong network of community organizations, businesses, and supporters. Ballard's vision for services revolves around the idea that any individual, child, and family within Douglas County has access to the resources necessary for stability, safety, health, and well-being. The Ballard Center serves a population that is predominantly low-income and includes many individuals from historically marginalized communities, who often face systemic barriers to accessing quality childcare, stable employment, and essential resources. The Ballard Center provides affordable, high-quality early childhood education and comprehensive wraparound support. These include a food pantry, clothing closet, and emergency assistance programs designed to help individuals and families navigate periods of instability. This paper analyzes the economic impact of the Ballard Center using national, state, and local data, highlighting how its integrated model contributes to immediate family stability and long-term community economic resilience.

Early Childhood Education Economic Impact

High-Quality Early Childhood Education (ECE)

High-quality early childhood education (ECE) includes a set of supportive systems that work together to foster children's development and overall family stability. These systems include a structured curriculum, well-trained and responsive educators, low child-to-teacher ratios (that allows for individualized attention), and access to comprehensive developmental, behavioral, and health services. Research demonstrates that when these elements are integrated, they are critical to producing strong long-term educational and economic benefits (Child Care Aware, 2019).

In addition to implementing high-quality classroom practices, the Ballard Center connects children and families to essential services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, and developmental screenings. These supports allow for early identification and intervention when developmental delays or challenges arise, reducing the likelihood of more intensive and costly services later on. Ballard's wraparound approach helps to stabilize families, which is a key factor in children's ability to learn and thrive. Together, these interconnected systems strengthen school readiness, promote healthier developmental outcomes, and contribute to more equitable long-term opportunities for the children and families served.

Return on Investment (ROI)

National research shows that high-quality early childhood programs generate approximately 7-13% annual return (García et al., 2016). Kansas-specific data reinforces this finding, demonstrating an annual return of 7% (Kansas Children's Cabinet, 2022). These economic gains are closely tied to measurable improvements in children's educational trajectories. For example, studies find that children who participate in high-quality early childhood education are less likely to experience grade retention, meaning they are less likely to be held back and required to repeat a grade, and are also less likely to be placed in special education programs (McCoy et al., 2017).

These outcomes occur because early childhood programs support critical cognitive, social-emotional, and language development during a key developmental window. By building foundational skills such as early literacy, self-regulation, and problem-solving, children entering kindergarten are better prepared to meet academic expectations. This early advantage reduces the likelihood of falling behind, which in turn lowers the need for costly interventions later in a child's education. Over time, these improved educational outcomes contribute to higher graduation rates, increased workforce participation, and reduced public spending; explaining the strong long-term economic returns associated with early childhood education investments (Desmond & Gershenson, 2015).

Long-Term Outcomes and Economic Value

Longitudinal studies consistently demonstrate that participation in high-quality ECE programs lead to significant improvements in life outcomes. Individuals who participate in ECE

are more likely to complete high school, which is strongly associated with higher lifetime earnings, increased employment stability, and greater contributions to the tax base. ECE participation is also linked to reduced rates of juvenile and adult arrests (Desmond & Gershenson, 2015). These reductions improve individual life trajectories and generate substantial public cost savings by decreasing expenditures on law enforcement, court systems, and incarceration (Desmond & Gershenson, 2015). ECE has been shown to reduce rates of child maltreatment and involvement in child welfare systems, lowering the financial and social burden associated with foster care, protective services, and long-term intervention (Desmond & Gershenson, 2015; Study Finds Economic Benefits of Early Education, 2003).

These outcomes translate into measurable economic benefits, including increased tax contributions and reduced public expenditures. Through a longitudinal study conducted by UW-Madison that started in 1985 and ended in 1998, it was found that participation in an 18-month preschool program generated a total return to society of approximately \$47,759 per participant, with inflation that amount in 2026 would be \$95,748 per child over their lifetime (Desmond & Gershenson, 2015; Study Finds Economic Benefits of Early Education, 2003).

Childcare Accessibility and Affordability

Economic Barriers

Childcare affordability remains a significant structural barrier to accessibility and sustained parent employment. Families in the United States typically spend between 10- 25% of their household income on childcare with costs disproportionately impacting single-parent households, where expenses can reach as high as 75% of total income (Palmer, 2023; First Five Years Fund, 2026). These high costs often force families to make difficult trade-offs between maintaining employment and securing reliable care.

Nationally:

- Families lose \$134 billion annually in earnings due to missing work, reduced hours, or job loss associated with childcare disruptions (First Five Years Fund, 2026)
- Businesses lose \$38 billion due to decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, and higher turnover rates when employees are unable to secure consistent care (First Five Years Fund, 2026)

- Governments lose \$37 billion in tax revenue from reduced taxable income (First Five Years Fund, 2026)

Nearly 60% of parents report that childcare challenges directly influence their ability to obtain or maintain employment (Bent, 2025), and many experience disruptions such as missed work or reduced productivity (KPMG, 2024). These disruptions disproportionately affect women, who continue to serve as primary caregivers and are more likely to reduce work hours, exit the workforce, or forgo career advancement due to childcare constraints. Data from the Parental Work Disruption Index highlights that women experience higher levels of workforce disruption tied to caregiving responsibilities, which contributes to persistent gender gaps in earnings and employment stability (KPMG, 2024). These patterns reduce immediate earnings but also limit long-term career advancement, wage growth, and economic mobility. Limited access to affordable childcare hinders labor force participation, suppresses household income, and weakens overall economic productivity, reinforcing cycles of financial instability for families.

Ballard's Approach

Affordable childcare increases workforce participation, reduces absenteeism, and boosts household income (Bent, 2025). These effects also benefit employers through reduced turnover, improved productivity, and greater workforce stability. The Ballard Center plays a critical role in advancing these outcomes by providing an accessible, affordable childcare option for the Douglas County community. The Ballard Center has implemented a 7% tuition model, ensuring that families pay no more than 7% of their household income on childcare, with a capped monthly cost of \$900 per child. Families also receive assistance in applying for funding through the Department of Children and Families subsidies, other local grants and scholarships. This approach directly addresses one of the most significant financial barriers facing working families. By providing reliable, high-quality care alongside financial accessibility, the Ballard Center enables families to remain engaged in the workforce while contributing to increased household income and local economic activity. In doing so, the organization serves as a critical support system for families and a key driver of economic stability within the community.

Living Wage and Benefits

Educator Challenges

Early childhood educators face significant economic insecurity and are substantially more likely to live in poverty than K-12 educators (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2024). Despite the critical role they play in supporting child development and enabling workforce participation for parents, early childhood educators are often compensated at levels that do not meet basic living standards. This wage disparity contributes to high rates of financial instability, with many educators relying on public assistance programs such as food stamps or housing subsidies to meet essential needs.

In addition to lower wages, many early childhood educators lack access to benefits such as health insurance, retirement plans, and paid leave (Early Care & Education Workforce Center, 2025). The absence of these benefits worsens economic insecurity, limiting educators' ability to achieve long-term financial stability. National data indicates that only a small proportion of early childhood programs offer a full package of benefits, while some offer none at all, creating wide disparities in job quality across the sector (Early Care & Education Workforce Center, 2025).

Economic Impact

These conditions contribute to high turnover rates, staffing shortages, and reduced program stability, all of which can negatively impact the quality of care and education provided to children (CSCCE, 2024). Workforce instability increases recruitment and training costs for employers and reduces overall system efficiency (CSCCE, 2024). Improving compensation and benefits for early educators has been shown to enhance retention, increase productivity, and strengthen program quality, ultimately leading to better developmental outcomes for children and stronger economic returns over time (CSCCE, 2024).

Failing to provide adequate wages shifts costs to taxpayers, who spend billions annually supporting underpaid workers through public assistance programs (CSCCE, 2024). Despite clear evidence that fair compensation improves economic outcomes, only 4% of the world's top 1,000 companies currently prioritize paying a living wage (World Economic Forum, 2024; Bell, 2026).

Ballards approach

The Ballard Center addresses the widespread challenges facing early childhood educators by prioritizing competitive compensation and comprehensive benefits. While many educators nationally experience low wages and limited access to benefits, Ballard offers an average hourly wage of \$19.55 and is actively working toward a \$20 per hour living wage for all education staff. This compensation level exceeds many local and national benchmarks and reflects a commitment to valuing the essential role educators play in child development and family stability. In addition to wages, the Ballard Center ensures that all employees have access to a full benefits package, including paid time off, health insurance, dental and vision coverage, a retirement plan, and life/disability insurance. This comprehensive approach directly addresses the gaps seen across much of the early childhood workforce, where benefits are often limited or unavailable (Early Care & Education Workforce Center, 2025). By providing both competitive pay and robust benefits, Ballard reduces financial stress for staff and supports long-term economic security. The Ballard Center also invests in ongoing professional development, creating opportunities for educators to build skills, advance their careers, and increase their earning potential over time. These strategies contribute to higher staff retention, improved job satisfaction, and greater program stability. A stable and well-supported workforce enhances the quality of care and education provided to children.

Community Services and Community Impact

Food and Economic Stability

Food insecurity continues to affect millions of children and families across the United States, with serious implications for short-term well-being and long-term economic outcomes (Rabbitt et al., 2025). At the local level, this issue is evident in Douglas County, where approximately 11.5% of residents experience food insecurity (Kansas Appleseed, 2025). Children in food-insecure households are more likely to experience developmental delays, poorer health outcomes, and lower academic performance (Hurley, et al, 2016). All these factors can limit future educational attainment and workforce participation. For families, food insecurity also creates ongoing financial strain, often forcing difficult trade-offs between essential needs and adequate nutrition.

Economic Implications

Improved nutrition in early childhood generates immediate and long-term economic benefits. Adequate nutrition supports cognitive development, which is directly linked to improved attention, memory, and learning capacity (Hurley et al., 2026). Children who enter school with strong cognitive and physical health foundations are more likely to perform well academically, reducing the need for costly interventions such as special education services and grade retention.

Public health research emphasizes that investments in early childhood nutrition are among the most cost-effective strategies for reducing long-term economic burdens associated with chronic disease and health inequities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025). By addressing nutrition early, the Ballard Center improves individual well-being and generates significant returns for society through reduced healthcare costs and enhanced human development.

Ballard's Approach

The Ballard Center prioritizes fresh, minimally processed foods and nutritionally balanced meals and snacks. By reducing ultra-processed foods and increasing children's access to fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and meals prepared from scratch, the Ballard Center actively supports healthier nutritional patterns during a critical stage of development. Ballard has recently partnered with Growing Food Growing Health, a program that employs youth to grow fruit and vegetables in a community garden that produces thousands of pounds of fresh food. This food is then used in Ballard's kitchen and distributed to families through the Ballard food pantry at no cost, increasing access to healthy, locally grown options. To further support food security, Ballard provides weekend grab bags to ensure that children enrolled in the early childhood program continue to have access to nutritious food even when programming is not in session. These efforts create a comprehensive approach to nutrition that supports child development, family stability, and broader community well-being.

Housing Stability

Housing stability is another critical element of overall well-being. Access to rental assistance has been shown to significantly reduce homelessness by 50% and overcrowding by

75% while providing families with a stable foundation to pursue employment and educational opportunities (Fischer et al., 2019). Stable housing enables individuals to maintain consistent employment, improves children's educational continuity, and reduces stress-related health issues (Fischer et al., 2019).

Housing instability and eviction have far-reaching negative consequences. Research demonstrates that eviction is associated with increased hospital visits, particularly for mental health-related conditions, as well as heightened financial and social instability (Desmond & Kimbro, 2015; National Bureau of Economic Research, 2023). These outcomes affect individuals and families and place additional strain on public systems like healthcare, emergency services, and the criminal justice system (Fischer et al., 2019). Preventing eviction and promoting housing stability are cost-effective strategies that reduce downstream public expenditures while improving economic stability.

Economic Returns

Investments in programs that address poverty and meet basic needs produce substantial economic returns. Research suggests that for every \$1 invested in poverty reduction efforts, society saves approximately \$7 through reduced spending on healthcare, criminal justice, and social services, as well as increased economic productivity (CommonBond Communities, 2020). These returns reflect the cumulative impact of stabilizing families, improving health outcomes, and enabling greater workforce participation.

Ballard's Approach

The Ballard Center plays a critical role in strengthening food and housing stability within the community. Through services such as its food pantry, clothing closet, emergency assistance, and resource navigation, the organization helps alleviate immediate financial strain while supporting long-term self-sufficiency. By ensuring that basic needs are met, the Ballard Center enables families to focus on employment, education, and child development, leading to improved economic outcomes at both the household and community levels. In doing so, these services support vulnerable populations and produce broader economic benefits by reducing reliance on public systems and enhancing overall community resilience.

Conclusion

Investment in high-quality early childhood education produces substantial and lasting returns for individuals, families, and communities. Research demonstrates that participation in programs like those offered at the Ballard Center leads to significantly improved life outcomes, including a 20% higher high school graduation rate, 86% higher early literacy scores, and 59% higher academic achievement by age 14 (Desmond & Gershenson, 2015). These educational gains are accompanied by meaningful social impacts, such as a 41% reduction in special education placement, a 42% decrease in violent juvenile arrests, and a 52% reduction in abuse and neglect (Desmond & Gershenson, 2015).

These outcomes result in clear and measurable economic gains. An 18-month investment in early childhood education has been estimated to generate approximately \$95,748 in total societal savings per child in today's dollars (Desmond & Gershenson, 2015). These benefits stem from reduced costs across education, criminal justice, and child welfare systems, along with increased tax revenue driven by higher levels of educational attainment and lifetime earnings. The work of the Ballard Center demonstrates that early childhood education is more than a simple social service; it is a strategic economic investment. By supporting children during their most critical developmental years and strengthening families through comprehensive services, the Ballard Center is helping to build a more stable, equitable, and economically resilient community.

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