



FOR GENDER JUSTICE

POLICY BRIEF

HELP PARENTS EARN WHILE CHILDREN LEARN: INVEST IN CHILD CARE AND EARLY LEARNING



THE PROBLEM

Child care and early learning opportunities help children get the strong start they need to succeed and enable parents to work so they can support their families and/or go to school to attain the skills they need to improve their economic circumstances. Yet, our child care and early learning system is fragile, and was brought to the brink of collapse by the COVID-19 public health crisis. Federal child care relief funding helped the child care sector stay afloat, but this funding is temporary—and even with it, many child care programs closed and child care employment remains below pre-pandemic levels. Even prior to the crisis, many families—particularly low-income families, families with infants or children with special needs, and parents working nontraditional hours (evenings, nights, weekends, or irregular schedules)—struggled to find and afford child care. The average annual cost of child care for one child ranges from \$5,200 to \$24,500. These costs leave many families—particularly low-income families—paying unaffordable sums out of pocket. Low-income families with children under 5 that pay for child care spend 35% of their income on child care, compared to 7% for higher-income families. The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), the major federal child care program, is aimed at helping low-income families afford child care, but it falls far short of meeting the need. Just one in six children eligible for federal child care assistance receives help.

Many children—particularly children in low-income families who stand to benefit the most—also lack access to high-quality preschool. Some support for prekindergarten is provided through federal and state programs, but state-funded preschool programs served just 32% of 4-year-olds and 6% of 3-year-olds enrolled in the 2021-22 school year. Most state programs also lack sufficient quality standards for their prekindergarten programs.

Yet, we cannot make child care and early learning more affordable for parents by reducing the costs of providing it. Child care and early education professionals who care for and teach our children—and who are overwhelmingly women and disproportionately women of color—are already paid low wages (a median of just \$13.71 per hour) that leave them straining to support themselves and their own families. The low pay for early educators further exacerbates the child care supply crisis as it is difficult to recruit and retain child care workers for poverty wages. The only path to build a sustainable and equitable child care system is through public investment.

THE SOLUTION

States should protect and significantly expand their investments in child care across the continuum, from care for infants and toddlers to prekindergarten to school-age care. States should prioritize raising state revenues from progressive sources to invest in child care and advocate for child care investments at the federal level.

States' child care and early learning policies should be designed to ensure that children have equitable access to healthy, safe, stable environments that promote their growth and learning. Key to this effort

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are initiatives that increase professional development opportunities, compensation for, and the voice of the child care and early learning workforce in state child care systems. Policies should also be designed and implemented thoughtfully—and with [input from parents and providers](#)—so that they meet the diverse needs of families, including those who work [non-standard hours](#), have children with disabilities, or have other special circumstances that can make it difficult for them to access or afford child care and early education programs. These families and families in underserved communities should receive priority and targeted [outreach](#) for child care assistance and early education programs.

BASIC ELEMENTS OF THE SOLUTION

- Protect and then build on state investments, and advocate for federal investments, to help families—particularly low- and moderate-income families—find and afford stable, high-quality child care for infants through school-age children.
- Support initiatives that enable child care workers to receive a living wage and benefits and to have a pathway to higher wages equivalent to similarly qualified K–12 educators.
- Increase payment rates to child care providers that serve families receiving child care assistance, use payment practices in the child care assistance program that reflect practices used in the private market—such as paying based on enrollment rather than attendance—and offer additional incentives and supports to encourage and enable providers to improve their quality.
- Fund grants, technical assistance, teacher recruitment efforts, and other initiatives to build the supply of affordable, high-quality child care for infants and toddlers, children with special needs, and children in underserved areas, including low-income communities and rural areas.
- Ensure parents who work nontraditional and unpredictable hours have child care options that meet their needs, by providing higher payment rates to child care providers offering these hours and other incentives, training, and supports to offer nontraditional-hour care.
- Ensure child care programs and resources are available to a full range of child care providers, including [family, friend, and neighbor \(FFN\) care providers](#), so that all families have options that meet their needs. FFN providers are often overlooked in policymaking, but they are often the option that families most trust, the only option available to offer care during parents’ nontraditional work hours, or families’ preferred choice for other reasons.
- Support initiatives to expand and ensure equitable access to professional development for child care providers.
- Fully implement the requirements and provisions of the CCDBG reauthorization law designed to ensure the health and safety of child care, improve the quality of care, and make it easier for

families to access child care assistance.

- Take advantage of flexibilities in the CCDBG program to respond to families’ and providers’ needs—for example, by expanding eligibility criteria and waiving copayments—during crises, [as was done during the pandemic](#).
- Ensure your state (if it has a personal income tax) has a fully [refundable child and dependent care tax credit \(CDCTC\)](#) so that families with little or no tax liability can take advantage of the credit.
- Make high-quality, full-school-day prekindergarten programs available to all 4-year-olds whose families want them to participate.
- Once prekindergarten is universally available to 4-year-olds, expand prekindergarten opportunities for 3-year-olds, beginning with low-income children.
- Design prekindergarten initiatives to include set-asides for infant-toddler care.
- Allow state funding for prekindergarten programs to be available to schools, child care providers, Head Start programs, and other community-based providers that meet high-quality standards.
- Establish a grassroots council of parents, providers, and other community leaders on how to best raise revenues for state investments and use funding to support the most underserved.

TALKING POINTS ON THE SOLUTION

- The COVID-19 public health crisis brought the already fragile child care system to the brink of collapse—and demonstrated how fundamental child care is to children, families, and the economy. We must provide significant new, ongoing public investments to rebuild the child care system and make it more resilient and equitable.
- High-quality child care and early learning is essential to enable parents to get and keep a job or advance their education, to give children a strong start toward success in school and a bright future, and to rebuild the economy.
- Parents are struggling to pay for child care and cannot afford to pay more than they already do, but current fees are not sufficient to support adequate pay for child care workers. Public investment is essential to solve this dilemma without placing a greater burden on parents or child care workers.
- Families on waiting lists for child care assistance are often forced to use a patchwork of unstable arrangements, causing disruption for children, more stress for parents, and a risk of job loss. Families that stretch to pay for reliable child care often struggle to pay for other necessities.
- Child care assistance helps everyone—more parents are able to work, children can learn and thrive, and employers can keep skilled, productive workers.
- Child care workers are always essential, and should be compensated accordingly.