

What should American child care look like? Some say: A public good ^[1]

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When most people talk child care in the United States, they talk affordability. Programs are often expensive, even for those who qualify for government subsidies.

Marcy Whitebook said Americans need to change the way they think about child care. She's the director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California at Berkeley, and a coauthor of a new report, "What does good child care reform look like?"

"The reason it's so expensive is because we're asking parents to shoulder the majority of the burden," Whitebook said. "I think if we thought of it more like K-12 education, something that children were entitled to ... it would be a very different situation."

Child care systems in Europe are often publicly funded, include paid family leave and programs for preschool-aged children and earlier. That's a model the United States could follow, Whitebook said. Child care in the United States is often privately run by small community businesses and small staffs.

"We've really never resolved these debates in the U.S.," Whitebook said. "Whereas in other countries they have resolved these debates, at least to some extent, better than we have."

A solution may be complicated. Child care reform had a place on the platforms of both the Clinton and Trump campaigns during the 2016 presidential election. But the discussion about the issue is fragmented.

"Is it education? Is it care?" Whitebook said. "Is it for children of working mothers? Is it for all children?"

Last month, President Donald Trump touted affordable child care during a speech at a women's empowerment panel at the White House.

"My administration will work every day to ensure that our economy is a place where women can work, succeed and thrive like never before," Trump said. "That includes fighting to make sure that all mothers, and all families, have access to affordable child care."

The remarks came after reports that Trump's daughter Ivanka Trump has advocated for the president to discuss paid family leave and phoned lawmakers to discuss child care legislation.

"It's just a very politicized, value-laden area of policy," Whitebook said. "We want people to be critical consumers of whatever proposals are put out there."

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