

Opinion: Without child care, there's no recovery ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Access full article online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

I kept thinking about Australia as I read this essay about the coming wipeout of American child care providers.

"Child care providers operate on razor-thin margins with very little cash reserves," write Lauren Birchfield Kennedy and Katie Mayshak. Because these small businesses rely on private fees rather than public support, "across the country, child-care providers are going under."

So why Australia? Because it's emerging as the great counterintuitive counterexample of this pandemic. Among the many bold, unifying steps taken by the conservative — even Trumpian — government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison has been to make child care free for three months.

The government was fearful of precisely what appears to be happening in the United States: That as parents — anxious about safety or their finances — pulled kids out of day care, the entire system would collapse.

Calling day care vital to Australia, Morrison said he wanted to build "a bridge for these valuable services to the other side of this virus" so that "Australia can bounce back strongly." Providers who receive the government subsidy are supposed to give priority to the children of essential workers, to vulnerable and disadvantaged children and to children who were already enrolled.

In New York, by contrast, Mayor Bill de Blasio and Governor Andrew Cuomo hesitated to shut the public schools because they feared that health workers, lacking any other way to care for their children, would have to stay home. Los Angeles wrestled with similar concerns.

Of course, there's so much we still don't know about Covid-19, including just how children might be vulnerable to it and whether, as with the flu, they might be super-spreaders of the virus (although one early study from Australia suggests not).

But, as the novelist Richard Flanagan wrote earlier this week, the Australian approach overall appears to be working. Australia has been nearly as successful as South Korea in containing the virus, and its economy, at least in the near term, is expected to perform far better than America's. Trust in government has soared.

From denying climate change and disrespecting civil servants, Morrison's government spun on its heel, rejecting ideology and embracing science and pragmatism.

"There are no blue teams or red teams," Morrison said last month. "There are just Australians now; that's all that matters."

Meanwhile, with almost half the year gone, the American president still has no real strategy to protect both public health and services like child care that are so critical to our economy. Nor is he making all Americans feel like they matter.

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