

Viewpoint: Child care can't be an afterthought ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

With an estimated 516,000 working parents in the D.C. area dependent upon child care services in order to function at and maintain their jobs, there is no question that child care services play a critical role in our economy. Business owners and employers need to play an active role in reinventing the system that supports child care once the pandemic ends. Without access to reliable child care services, working parents must enter a balancing act, weighing the needs of their employers against the needs of their children.

A survey of 2,557 working parents conducted by Northeastern University from May 10 to June 22 found that businesses lose on average eight hours of work a week — the equivalent of a full day — when an employee has to address their kids' needs. Yet the support provided to maintain child care businesses has been woefully inadequate. In March, as child care providers began to feel the financial toll of the pandemic, an estimated 215,000 children across Maryland, Virginia and D.C. were at risk of losing their space at a licensed child care facility. And that number only grows higher as pandemic-related disruptions continue without public or private financial intervention.

The child care system in our country was broken before the pandemic, but Covid-19 has brought the issue to the forefront. In Virginia alone, 42% of the regulated child care capacity is unavailable due to Covid-19. As of late August, one in three centers had not provided the state regulatory agency a planned reopening date. This newfound awareness of challenges businesses face with child care should propel us to support increasing public support for this essential service.

What does it mean to reinvent child care? First, we need to shift our mental models regarding what it takes to do this work. Early care and education, as I prefer to call it, is much more than babysitting — attending to the needs of young children who are not your own in a group setting requires knowledge and understanding about child development. Eighty-five percent of the architecture of a child's brain is formed during the first three years of life. We need to begin investing in child care programs in a way that recognizes the experiences children have in these settings help establish the foundation for all future learning.

Second, given the benefit that participating in the workforce can provide for families and our overall economy, we need a better system to finance child care costs. In our current system, states receive funding from a federal block grant program that provides assistance to help low-income working families pay for child care. States then allocate those funds to various localities to help parents pay for services. However, because these subsidy payments often fail to cover market rate costs, families encounter difficulties finding centers to serve their children. Many families are placed on a waiting list once funds from the state are depleted. For parents who do not qualify for subsidy assistance, paying for these services can feel a lot like paying college tuition at the front end of a child's life — even more so as costs increase due to heightened cleaning procedures and reduced enrollments in a post-Covid world.

Knowing the benefits of having more engaged and productive employees, businesses can and should become more involved in strengthening the child care industry. Business leaders need to educate themselves about the child care market near their establishments as well as where their employees live. Co-locating centers in or near places of work, where lease payments for operators can be subsidized if business owners agree to pass along savings to parents in the form of reduced fees, is another potential solution. Businesses can also explore ways to subsidize costs for child care within their benefit structures. In short, getting to a better financed system will require both public and private investments, because there are public and private benefits.

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