

Why child care staff had to show up while teachers worked remotely^[1]

The pandemic has spotlighted disparities in working conditions between child care workers and teachers.

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EXCERPTS

Last summer, when New York City abruptly delayed the start of in-person classes, the Cypress Hills Child Care Corporation in Brooklyn opened right on schedule — complete with a spray of balloons tied to the front door and festive music booming from a speaker. And when the entire public school system shut down in November because of rising virus cases, the state required the center and many other child care facilities across the city to stay open.

“When there’s a school closure, they don’t even include us, we are always an afterthought,” said Maria Collier, who runs the center, which serves mostly low-income Latino students. “We were deemed essential workers. But if teachers are in Department of Education schools, they were not essential workers.”

Over the last year, some educators, school officials and teachers’ union leaders in New York and across the country have declared that teachers are not babysitters, and that schools are not child care centers. The sentiment has been meant to convince the public that teachers should not be responsible for supervising children just so that parents can return to work.

But while some educators have been able to work from home for much, if not all, of the pandemic, child care centers have emerged as substitute schools for many thousands of American children for whom online learning is not an option.

For months, those students have been supervised by child care, after-school and day care employees — sometimes in the very same classrooms that were closed for in-person instruction because of high virus cases and concerns among teachers’ unions about safety measures.

That stark imbalance has underscored longstanding inequities between child care workers and public school educators, and raised uncomfortable questions about which employees are considered essential.

The outsize role that child care workers have played during the pandemic is fueling a push by child care providers, activists and some politicians to give child care employees more protections, pay and power, and to integrate child care into the broader education system. Child care experts said they were encouraged that the American Rescue Plan includes nearly \$40 billion for the industry.

“We treat public education as the public good that it is, but we don’t do that for child care,” said Julie Kashen, director for women’s economic justice at the Century Foundation, a left-leaning think tank. “We’ve created this false dichotomy between the two.”

That split is playing out in real time as the coronavirus vaccine is rolled out.

President Biden recently announced that all teachers and child care workers should be prioritized for a shot by the end of March. That will force a change in Ohio, Kentucky, Utah, Wyoming and Oklahoma, where educators were made eligible to receive the coronavirus vaccine before child care employees. Even in the many states, including New York, where child care workers have been given priority for the shot, some workers have struggled to get vaccinated.

Child care employees in Washington, D.C., were initially not prioritized alongside teachers. “It is crucial — and equitable — to provide vaccinations for the child care teachers and workers who have swallowed their fears, donned their P.P.E., and shown up at work day after day to provide crucial care for D.C.’s children,” wrote Kristen Maxson, the director of a nursery school in Washington, in a petition urging the city to change its policy, which it recently did.

In New York, Ms. Collier has said there has been no streamlined way for her employees to make appointments, whereas the United Federation of Teachers, which represents tens of thousands of New York City teachers, is matching members with available doses through agreements with local health care providers.

The U.F.T. has greater influence in city politics than District Council 37, a larger union that represents many child care workers, after-school employees and other essential workers, along with many white-collar employees who have worked remotely during the pandemic.

Many other child care workers around the country — the majority of whom are nonwhite — are in unions that do not have the same political clout as teachers' unions, and many are not unionized at all. That dynamic, along with differences in teaching credentials, helps explain why child care workers tend to make significantly less money than public schoolteachers.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, a national teachers' union that represents about 100,000 child care workers along with teachers, said that the last year is a clear argument for a more robust unionization effort in the child care industry.

"It is clear we have not been as successful, and we've tried, in being able to unionize" those workers, she said. "I think Covid has demonstrated the absolute need for an effective child care system throughout the country."

It has also, Ms. Kashen said, prompted an awkward question for teachers' unions and school districts: "Who are we willing to put at risk?"

Part of that answer can already be found in how cities across the country have approached supervision of children who are not able to learn from home, either because their parents have to work in person or because remote learning is too challenging.

Teachers in San Francisco have been working remotely for a full year as public schools have remained all virtual. Since last fall, about 500 after-school employees and parks and recreation staffers have been supervising some of the city's neediest students, including homeless children and students in foster care, at nearly 80 so-called learning hubs throughout the city.

Those staffers have been given a new title that the city believes better reflects their work: "education and youth development frontline responders."

That description feels apt to Misha Olivas, the director of programs at United Playaz, an after-school organization in San Francisco that has been running two community hubs for much of the pandemic. The programs operate from 8:30 a.m. until 5:30 p.m., and staffers are responsible for helping students with their school work, arranging outdoor activities and attending to their emotional well-being. The hubs, along with many like them across the country, serve students across grade levels, including high schoolers.

"We have seen our role as vital," Ms. Olivas said. But, she added, "It has been a lot for our staff to juggle." Members of her team of after-school employees have functioned as in-person teachers, tutors and therapists, and workers have risked their own health and isolated themselves from family and friends to do so.

"Here we are a year later," Ms. Olivas said, "and schools still aren't open."

Before Washington, D.C., reopened many of its schools in February, the district opened dozens of classrooms, mostly for children with disabilities and homeless students, who were supervised by after-school workers or school support staff who volunteered to return, rather than teachers.

Chicago operated learning hubs in classrooms and community centers for children who could not stay home for much of the past year. And Montgomery County, Maryland, and Fairfax, Virginia, have each hired hundreds of classroom monitors — some of whom will not receive benefits — to supervise children doing online lessons from their classrooms while their teachers work remotely.

When all 1,800 schools in New York City closed last March to slow the spread of the virus, the city turned school buildings into so-called regional enrichment centers for the children of emergency medical workers. Those centers were run and staffed mostly by members of D.C. 37, though some U.F.T.-affiliated teachers also volunteered.

The centers were open longer than a typical school day and remained open on federal holidays to allow nurses, emergency medical technicians and other frontline employees to report to the city's overwhelmed hospitals.

Some child care centers in providers' homes also remained open through the peak of the pandemic, and many other child care programs reopened over the summer, after brief attempts to teach toddlers remotely.

That was not because the city's child care employees, many of whom make just \$15 an hour, were inherently more willing than teachers to risk their own health.

Instead, child care centers had to stay open in order to stay afloat. Providers feared they would not be reimbursed by the state or federal government if they temporarily shut because of the virus.

"When a lot of teachers were working remotely, a lot of our members were coming," said Henry Garrido, D.C. 37's president. "Most of my members are people of color who have been hit the hardest by Covid," he said, adding, "They had to be much more exposed, clearly that put our members at risk to a high degree."

Mr. Garrido said about 200 of his members have died from Covid since the start of the pandemic, many of whom were child care workers and school support staff like custodians. The U.F.T. lost 76 members.

Mr. Garrido said that some child care providers struggled to obtain personal protective equipment and often lacked information about safety measures and quarantining protocols that were shared with teachers. That's partially because it is difficult to coordinate the city's child care offerings, which are spread among private homes, community-based centers and nonprofits and public school classrooms.

Melissa Caceres-Lazo, a prekindergarten teacher at the Cypress Hills center, said she is constantly worried about bringing the virus home to her elderly father.

She and her colleagues are proud of their work at the center, she said, particularly over the last year. "We do it because we love to teach kids," she said. "When we are here, we play all the roles: teachers, moms, friends."

But Ms. Caceres-Lazo said she did not understand why so many public schoolteachers were allowed to work from home while she was not. “If we don’t come to work, we don’t get paid,” she said. “It wasn’t a choice for me.”

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