

# Child care crisis: Costs, worker shortage leading to 'untenable' situation <sup>[1]</sup>

Many contend solution lies in increased government funding.

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## EXCERPTS

The COVID-19 pandemic worsened challenges parents have long faced in finding affordable, quality child care; intensified problems companies have filling jobs; and set back efforts to help preschoolers get ready for kindergarten.

"These are big issues and it's what we have known all along. But through the pandemic, it's finally hitting people and they're finally valuing early childhood education in a different way," said Lisa Babb, strategic director of program operations for 4C For Children, a state-funded child care resource and referral agency serving the 10-county Dayton region.

"It's going to take resources but there is an answer to this. We've got to figure this out. We just have to."

High-quality, year-round child care costs \$10,000 to \$15,000 per child annually in the Dayton region, said Robyn Lightcap, executive director of Preschool Promise, a nonprofit funded by Montgomery County and the city of Dayton that serves families in seven local communities.

Some local child care centers, in-home providers and after school programs that closed during the pandemic never reopened, while others reopened with limited capacity, Babb said, and she believes problems will intensify as companies bring remote workers back to the office.

"Prior to the pandemic we certainly had child care deserts, places in the state where there wasn't child care. Perhaps some of our rural communities didn't have child care options, let alone affordable child care options," said Warren County Commissioner Shannon Jones, also president and CEO of Groundwork Ohio, a Columbus-based nonprofit child advocacy group. "It persists. It's even more pronounced now."

It is also difficult to find child care for part-time or non-traditional work hours, and the current Delta variant surge has amplified fears some parents have about in-home or center-based care.

The recent reopening of public schools, which was supposed to help parents return to work, instead resulted in surging COVID-19 cases and quarantines as many districts chose to start the year without mask or vaccine mandates.

"As long as we continue to see these surges, it's going to continue to be an issue," said Doug Barry, owner of BarryStaff in Dayton. "Until people are comfortable getting more kids together, whether it's in a child care facility or a private residence, until they are comfortable that they're not putting their kids in harm's way, it's going to be an issue."

The Dayton Daily News interviewed two dozen child care experts, business leaders, educators, politicians and parents and analyzed reams of reports and data to study the child care crisis and explore possible solutions as part of our Path Forward Initiative.

Our investigation found broad consensus that child care and preschool are crucial to families, children, businesses and the economy, and that it is time for solutions to be put into place to fix long-standing problems with affordability, access, quality and low pay for child care workers and preschool teachers.

"This isn't babysitting. This is about having access to affordable, high-quality child care. We've under-invested in it for years," said David Melin, Dayton regional president at PNC Bank, which funds a statewide child care initiative. "If we want the workforce of the 21st century, we better start investing now."

## 'A situation that is untenable'

Local companies report major problems finding workers, prompting the Dayton Area Chamber of Commerce to advocate for continued state funding of child care and to publish a resource guide to help employers connect parents with child care.

"When COVID hit, I think the employers who maybe weren't as engaged really had their eyes opened because they saw first hand how it was impacting their workers," said Stephanie Keinath, vice president of strategic initiatives at the Dayton chamber.

An adult in nearly 4.8 million households with children under age 5 nationwide had to cut work hours, leave a job, lost a job or did not look

for work in order to care for a child who could not go to a child care provider because of safety concerns in the four weeks prior to a U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey collected Aug. 4-16.

A separate U.S. Census dataset showed that as of January 2021, about 10 million mothers were living with their school-age children and not working, a 1.4 million increase compared to January 2020.

"Women are being disproportionately affected. They are more likely to decline job opportunities and promotions than men. They're more likely to leave the workforce altogether than men," Keinath said. "And most of them who do (leave) report that child care is the primary reason. This is a situation that is untenable."

Record numbers of women have dropped out of the workforce during the pandemic. Last year 1.9 million fewer women were in the labor force than in 2019, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The child care crisis hits single parents particularly hard because they have less financial flexibility to leave jobs to care for children, said Richard Stock, director of the University of Dayton Business Research Group, which does data analysis for Preschool Promise.

"The ones who are not leaving the labor force are having to make awful choices at this point," said Stock, who fears some desperate parents are keeping their older kids home from school to care for preschoolers while they go to work.

### **What local businesses are doing**

It's not just access, said Keinath. Quality and funding also matter.

"Employers are realizing that they have to be at the table earlier on, talking about how they can help their employees access resources that maybe they are not aware of," she said. "And then there are the players who want to get even more creative, looking at, 'Does this become an employee benefit?'"

That includes SugarCreek, a Washington Court House-based food manufacturer with a Dayton facility. The company subsidizes costs at an onsite child care center operated by the Y in Washington Court House and an off-site one in Indiana. SugarCreek plans to expand it to all facilities, said Rachel Hopkins, executive special events manager.

"We hope it is something that makes us an employer of choice for our workers," Hopkins said. "And it is also the right thing to do."

Over the past decade PNC Bank's Grow Up Great initiative invested \$10 million in Ohio, including \$1 million in the Dayton region, in early childhood education programs. PNC gave \$100,000 to Preschool Promise last year to help pre-K centers survive the pandemic and for tuition assistance to essential workers.

PNC also gives employees up to 40 hours of paid time off to volunteer at pre-K programs, and those workers have contributed more than 21,000 volunteer hours in the Dayton region.

"Business needs to have a strong voice at the public policy level, letting our public officials know the importance of early childhood education," Melin said.

Some local manufacturing companies made changes to attract workers, said Angelia Erbaugh, president of the Dayton Region Manufacturers Association.

"Some are offering part-time work to accommodate child care schedules," Erbaugh said. "Most reported they are looking at ways to be more flexible in their shifts/work day/part-time opportunities."

Business leaders and child care experts say the connection between child care and workforce is twofold.

"The spotlight has been shown on the critical support that child care and schools provide to the workforce," said Berta Velilla, CEO of Miami Valley Child Development Centers, which operates Head Start in Montgomery, Clark and Madison counties. "When we talk about what we do in our business, we support the workforce of today and the workforce of tomorrow."

A study commissioned by Groundwork Ohio found increased child care subsidies would bring more parents into the workforce and said the advantages of providing high-quality care outweighs the cost of those programs.

"The benefits of early care and education are often long-lasting. They included higher academic achievement, better employment options and many other secondary effects such as improved health outcomes and reduced involvement with the criminal justice system," according to the study released in May by the University of Cincinnati Economics Center, which focused on Ohio and seven regions, including Montgomery County.

### **The pandemic impact**

Centerville parent Kate Vriner said she moved her two daughters to the private Incarnation School, which requires masks and places desks six feet apart, because she felt there was less chance it would need to go remote.

"We couldn't risk them being out of school again for a long period of time," Vriner said. "With the Delta variant and the uncertainty, we made the decision to switch them over."

Some parents at the Dayton Early College Academy say they have trouble finding after school child care, said David Taylor, superintendent.

"A number of people say, 'I used to have my parents watch my kids and now because of COVID they are unable to,'" Taylor said.

It's not known how many local child care providers closed permanently because of the pandemic, but there has been a sharp decline in enrollment.

There is no way to know how many in-home, unlicensed child care providers exist. About 350 licensed child care centers, home-based providers and preschools exist in Montgomery County. Enrollment data isn't available for all of them, but Stock said enrollment declined by 2,480 since the pandemic hit at the 180 providers for which data is available.

Those providers have 6,003 kids enrolled, including 2,463 in the Preschool Promise program.

Some centers have had to limit enrollment, he said, because they don't have enough staff.

In Ohio 76% of child care centers have a staffing shortage and 75% identify low wages as the main problem recruiting workers, according to a survey in early summer by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

"When you're offered wages somewhere between \$9 and \$13 an hour and you're asking people to risk their lives in a small classroom setting, with kids that have a viral load but don't necessarily look sick themselves, it starts being really difficult," Stock said. "And there's other work out there."

### **'Broken market'**

The median hourly wage for a child care worker is \$12.24 and is \$15.35 for a preschool teacher, a job that requires a college degree, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Providers are limited in how much they can raise wages because of the direct impact on what they charge parents.

The annual cost for all-day care in Ohio averages \$10,009 for an infant in center-based care and \$7,592 for an infant in home-based care, according to ChildCare Aware of America.

"The issue with child care cuts across all socio-economic sectors. It's too expensive for low income families, it's too expensive for moderate income families and it's too expensive for higher income families," said Jones, who is a Republican former state legislator. "The idea that the market can take care of this challenge is just a fallacy. We know this is a broken market."

A growing chorus of parents, child care providers, advocates, educators and business leaders say the solution is increased government funding.

"There is so much evidence that it is the most important time of brain development," Lightcap said. "People aren't even debating that anymore. It's just that our policies haven't caught up with reality."

Eighty-eight percent of parents believe expanded government support for child care would benefit parents and children, according to a national Bipartisan Policy Center/Morning Consult survey released in May. It found that 71% said they would send their child to free pre-K if it were available.

Federal, state and some local governments — including Montgomery County and Dayton — already help with some child care costs. Federal child care tax credits are available to parents. The federal government funds Head Start, which is free to income-eligible families but doesn't have enough money to serve everyone who is eligible. Ohio recently increased the level for its state child care subsidy to 142% of the poverty level, which is \$24,736 for a single parent with one child, but still has the third lowest eligibility level in the country.

That increase in the subsidy was paired with a lowering of the quality requirements for providers, something opposed by child care advocates.

President Joe Biden's proposed \$3.5 trillion "Build Back Better" plan includes universal preschool and would limit how much working families pay for child care, although how much those programs would cost is not yet known.

"Building out our child care infrastructure and investing in the child care workforce will help support working families and strengthen our economy," said U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio. "Corporations can help us pay for this by paying their fair share in taxes."

Opponents of more government funding point to limited taxpayer resources or argue against increased government involvement in child care.

"I am actually offended at some level of this by the notion that as a parent, my children will be seven times better off if they are put into a government-directed, center-based child care than if they are at home," said Rachel Greszler, a research fellow at the conservative leaning Heritage Foundation.

U.S. Sen. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, opposes Biden's plan, calling it "a spending spree that will cost jobs and undermine our economy."

"This is exactly the wrong approach for our economy, and similar to the \$1.9 trillion stimulus spending bill enacted by Democrats this spring, will only drive inflation higher," Portman said.

Jones said there are always ways to improve policy proposals and she's just glad to see the president talking about the need for affordable child care to help parents and businesses and to provide nurturing early learning environments that prepare kids for lifelong success.

"That in and of itself is so substantial, that we really should take notice of something that women have known about for a really long time, have been talking about for a really long time," Jones said. "And now the president of the United States is talking about it."

**Region:** United States [3]

**Tags:** COVID-19 <sup>[4]</sup>  
economic recovery <sup>[5]</sup>  
child care workforce <sup>[6]</sup>

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