

Iowa's child care debate has big lessons for the rest of the country^[1]

Advocates and early childhood experts around the country want more government action, but not the kind some Republicans are offering.

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EXCERPTS

Kelly Donnelly was thrilled to hear her state's Republican lawmakers were going to act on child care — but grew alarmed when she learned what exactly they had in mind.

Donnelly is director of the Grace Preschool, a Des Moines, Iowa, early childhood center that has won international recognition for its high quality. It has struggled during the pandemic, first with plummeting enrollment and, now, with a tight labor market that makes it difficult to hire and retain staff.

The same thing is happening all over America, with far-reaching consequences. Working parents can't find places to put their kids, businesses can't get their employees back on the job. In Iowa, Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds has responded by identifying child care as a top priority and promising legislation on the matter.

"No one should be forced to choose between earning a living and caring for their child," Reynolds said in her "Condition of the State" address last month.

Donnelly hoped that promise would mean significant new state expenditures on child care to subsidize families that can't afford it and, especially, to subsidize wages of caregivers, so that centers like hers could compete with the local retailers and service industries offering higher pay.

But the three bills that the GOP legislature has taken up so far adopt a very different approach, seeking to deregulate the industry rather than invest in it. One particularly controversial piece of legislation would reduce adult-to-child ratios, so that one care worker could watch over as many as eight 2-year-olds, instead of the six that the state now allows.

Donnelly worries about the added strain on providers and the increased danger for kids getting less supervision. "If you're giving them less attention, accidents are going to happen," said Donnelly, who is also a volunteer with Iowa's Save the Children Action Network.

Child care advocates in Iowa remain hopeful that Reynolds and her Republicans in the legislature will come forth with more proposals, including some that find ways to get more state money into the system. But they also fear that the bills are indicative of where the debate over child care is going in Iowa and in the U.S. as a whole.

It's quite a turn from where the conversation was for most of last year, when President Joe Biden and congressional Democrats were putting together their Build Back Better legislation. A major goal was to create something like a universal child care program with high quality standards, including better pay for staff.

Today that legislation's future is uncertain, because a single Democratic senator objects to its overall size and structure. Even if a version passes, it would rely heavily on implementation by the states, and it's an open question whether Republican-led states like Iowa would participate.

A problem that predates the pandemic

Iowa certainly needs help. It has one of the nation's highest percentages of families with working parents who need child care, according to census figures. It also has a relatively large number of counties with a few-to-no accredited child care providers, known as "child care deserts."

The problems predate the pandemic. In 2015, a statewide organization called the Iowa Women's Foundation convened discussions with leaders from 18 communities, asking them to identify the one issue on which they thought government action could do the most to help girls and women. Child care was the clear choice.

"We were surprised," foundation president Dawn Oliver Wiand told HuffPost. "I really thought it would have been employment, or maybe

education and training. But it was child care.”

Iowa isn’t unique in this respect. With no comprehensive national child care program, responsibility in the U.S. has fallen heavily on individual families who frequently don’t have much money to pay for care. That has limited revenues for providers, who in turn can’t pay high salaries, leaving them to draw from a limited labor pool.

Advocates have long called for government action to subsidize families and to boost provider wages. That would require some large outlays of money, but advocates say the investment would yield big, quantifiable returns for the rest of society.

Fewer care workers would have to rely on food assistance and other taxpayer-financed benefits, the advocates argue, while the field would attract more experienced and talented workers, improving the quality of care. At the same time, parents would have an easier path back to the workplace if they wanted one.

Miranda Niemi, who operates the Collins Aerospace Day Academy in Cedar Rapids, can attest personally to the difference that extra investment makes. She lost staff during the pandemic and when the kids started coming back, she couldn’t find replacements because local retailers and restaurants were offering better pay.

She worked out an agreement with Collins Aerospace, the large employer that subsidizes child care for its workers at the center, that increased the center’s revenue so that she could raise wages. The difference was dramatic. A dozen openings drew 68 applicants, some with 20 years of experience and degrees in education or child development.

“I keep trying to tell people, you have to invest in the workforce,” Niemi told HuffPost. “If you can offer competitive wages, you’ll be able to get them in.”

The approach Iowa Republicans are taking

That is not the approach that Republicans in the Iowa legislature have taken with their three new bills.

One would allow 16- and 17-year-old employees to watch over school-aged kids without adult supervision — a prospect that worries advocates and many providers, who question whether teens are ready for that responsibility. Another bill would let providers charge co-pays to families on government assistance, even though those families are by definition struggling to cover basic life expenses.

“We can’t charge families anymore,” Tracy Elhert, an early childhood educator and consultant who is now a Democratic state representative, told HuffPost. “They already can’t afford it. It’s the same as college tuition in a lot of these programs.”

Then there is the bill to reduce adult-to-child ratios, even for young children who frequently aren’t verbal and haven’t learned sharing — and are also going through potty training, which requires more individualized adult supervision.

“I really would like to invite them in for a day just to visit and actually spend time in a room,” said Niemi, who is also president of Iowa’s Association for the Education of Young Children. “There are things we do, to set up the environment up as safe as we can, but they need adults to be able to make sure that they’re making smart choices and not dangerous choices, and that they’re being safe. I just don’t know how they’re going to get that with the higher ratios.”

Supporters of the GOP bills point out that providers would be under no obligation to change their adult-to-child ratios. “This is a ceiling, not a requirement,” Ann Meyer, Republican chair of the House Human Resources Committee, told the Iowa Capital Dispatch. (Meyer’s office did not respond to HuffPost inquiries.)

But even providers who say they wouldn’t raise the ratios worry that other providers might, especially if they are under financial pressure.

“I’ve had parents stopping and telling me thank you, because I was on the news here locally saying I won’t warehouse kids,” Niemi said. “But maybe there’s another child care provider really struggling to keep their doors open. Are they going to do it? Probably, because it’s a little extra income.”

Donnelly shares those worries, and can’t help but notice that the legislature, while not jumping to spend money on child care, is proposing to use current budget surpluses to finance a large tax cut, which the governor also supports.

“Instead of investing funds for child care, they are planning on giving \$300 million to corporate tax cuts,” Donnelly said. “Our leadership is being short-sighted on where they need to invest funds.”

The possibilities for federal action

Looming over this debate is the possibility of federal government action — which, in turn, comes down to a question of whether Biden and Democratic leaders can enact some version of Build Back Better’s early childhood initiative.

The proposal calls for creating free pre-kindergarten programs and offering subsidies for child care, so that no family has to spend more than 7% of its income on tuition and fees. The subsidies could go to any licensed child care provider — large or small; government-run, secular or faith-based — as long as they meet certain standards for quality, anti-discrimination and worker pay.

Negotiations stalled in December because Democrats can’t lose the support of a single caucus member in the evenly divided Senate and one of them, Joe Manchin of West Virginia, objected to the legislation’s overall size and structure. Just this past week, Manchin said the package was “dead.”

But Manchin has said he’s willing to work on an alternative that keeps some of the bill’s components. He has also indicated he supports the

bill's early childhood portions, objecting only to the idea that funding might be temporary instead of permanent. Biden and Democratic leaders have said they are committed to working with him to forge an agreement.

The proposal in Build Back Better envisions states implementing the programs. In Iowa, advocates say they are uncertain how Reynolds and GOP leaders would react.

Reynolds has already used federal pandemic relief funds to expand the state's WAGE\$ program, which provides semi-annual pay bonuses to providers with educational credentials, to include all 99 of the state's counties. Previously it covered just 39.

Overall, new grants and initiatives underwritten by state and federal dollars have increased the number of child care "slots" in Iowa by more than 9,000, according to the governor's office.

But the Build Back Better proposal would require states to commit to the program long-term and GOP leaders have balked at that in the past, Elhert said. "They don't want to make any permanent investments. We'll start getting some of those federal funds, but when they're gone, it's back to square one."

The proposal in Build Back Better has a fallback provision, allowing local governments and Head Start agencies to participate in the program directly, even if state officials decline. Iowa advocates said they were prepared to investigate that possibility, if the proposal becomes law and Iowa refuses to participate.

But their preference would still be state action. Some, like Oliver Wiand from the Iowa Women's Foundation, think it might be possible through some kind of compromise that includes child care proposals in line with Republican policy preferences.

"I want to believe that we're going to come together and address this," said Oliver Wiand, who served on the Reynolds task force, and who thinks the ultimate solution will require a contribution from every interested party, including not just the federal and state governments but the private sector as well.

She likes to remind people that Iowa has a long tradition of broad, bipartisan support for early childhood programs. Now it's a question of whether that tradition continues today.

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