

Better regulations for child care overdue in South Carolina [US-SC]^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS

Regulations designed to help ensure the youngest South Carolinians get the best possible start on their education and development are headed to the General Assembly next week. The package concerning child care is scheduled to get its first consideration by lawmakers in a subcommittee of the House Medical, Military, Public and Municipal Affairs Committee. It is crucial that those lawmakers—and the entire General Assembly—understand how these regulations came into being and the benefit they would offer our state.

We all know that education, and improving academic outcomes, is crucial to improving South Carolinians' quality of life. The connection may be hard to see, but many times, we are losing the battle over things such as higher per capita income in the earliest years of life. Children who do not begin school prepared to learn usually never catch up with their better-prepared peers. There is a direct connection between this lack of school readiness and problems such as our high dropout rate. Many more of our children need a better start than they are getting today.

Child care centers have become more than babysitting facilities. They are establishing the building blocks for lifelong learning. Brain research shows that the connections made in the early years determine future educational success. Meanwhile, census figures show that nearly 70 percent of mothers in the United States with children under 6 are in the workforce. Many of their babies and young children are getting their first, most important developmental experiences in child care centers. We must ensure that child care in our state is a nurturing, age-appropriate educational environment. These proposed regulations take the necessary steps to begin doing that.

Other states are far ahead of South Carolina on this front. They have lowered the number of babies one adult may take care of at one time. They have reduced overall class sizes to manageable levels. The Palmetto State must follow suit. The package of child care regulations being considered was developed over a years-long process of debate and consensus. Because of concerns about increasing the cost of child care to parents, the advisory panel that developed the package asked that the changes be phased in over a period of years. Cost of care is no small concern in our state, and it has been raised and addressed by the package's framers.

Now, at the 11th hour, a small group of for-profit child care centers is trying to derail the regulations and an accompanying, volunteer rating service for centers, known as Palmetto Stars. The scare tactic they are employing is to imply that the regulations and Palmetto Stars will immediately result in drastic price increases for parents.

Lawmakers must not be fooled by this diversion. The package of regulations is endorsed by the vast majority of child care operators in our state, whether they be church-based, private non-profit or private for-profit entities. A number of the child care businesses in our state also operate profitably in other states where the regulations already are much tighter and children are being better served.

For too long, on too many issues, South Carolina has allowed narrow interests to block change that could move our state forward. This set of proposed regulations is a long-overdue reform that should be allowed to go to work for the betterment of our youngest South Carolinians.

- reprinted from the The State [South Carolina]

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