

Get real about child care [US] ^[1]

Opinion

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EXCERPTS

Wisconsin politicians love to talk about how much they care about kids.

But those are just sound bites, uttered at election time, in order to create the false impression that they are genuinely concerned about the children of this state.

If Wisconsin politicians were serious about doing right by our children, they would have been elbowing one another aside last week in order to advance legislation to guarantee better wages and benefits for day care workers, and more sympathetic rules and regulations for child care providers.

That's because, if they really cared about the children of this state, they would not want another Worthy Wage Day to go by without any significant improvement in the circumstance of child care workers and providers. Worthy Wage Day, an annual day of action created by campaigners for better wages and conditions for child care workers and providers, was designated to highlight the fact that caregivers for our kids tend to earn poverty wages, often go without benefits and, ultimately, are forced out of the work they love because they cannot afford to carry on. A related goal was to illustrate the challenges faced by responsible child care providers, who get plenty of directives from government but little in the way of assistance.

Unfortunately, while recent years have seen incremental progress on some fronts, the reality is that Wisconsin legislators, like their compatriots in most other states, refuse to get serious about improving the lot of the people who educate, nurture and protect our children.

Or, we should say, most legislators.

Earlier this year, state Rep. Spencer Black, D-Madison, announced a series of proposals designed to stem the high turnover rate of child care workers while making day care more affordable.

Black proposed to:

- Reimburse child care workers on an annual basis for 10 percent of their outstanding student loan payments, up to \$1,000, for a maximum of five years.
- Expand BadgerCare, the state's health plan for low-income working families, to include child care workers regardless of whether they have children.
- Restore a state income tax credit for child care expenses of up to \$1,050 a year per family. The credit, which was eliminated in 1986, would mirror a credit available to federal taxpayers.
- Black's proposals are really only first steps - or, should we say, baby steps. But even they were too much for the current Legislature, which failed to act.

So next time a politician says he or she cares about kids, ask that lawmaker point blank: What did you do to pass Spencer Black's child care legislation? And then ask: What is your plan to help child care providers?

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