



America, It's Time to Talk About Child Care

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Introduction

All children deserve to have nurturing, enriching early experiences that support healthy development. Families—across race, ethnicity, religion, immigration status, and economic background—want their children to grow up to be happy and thriving adults. Child care is a critical tool for families in realizing their children’s full potential. With access to affordable, quality child care options, families can pursue employment and educational opportunities that contribute to family stability and financial security. Children benefit from participating in programs that support their development and learning, beginning at birth and continuing through elementary school in the after-school hours and summer months. Communities prosper because child care promotes economic growth, racial and economic equity, and child well-being. The United States has yet to realize the benefits of investing in child care for all children and families and lags behind most other industrialized countries in this regard. This report explains why our nation’s leaders must immediately prioritize solutions that make quality child care affordable and accessible to all families.

The United States can and should build a child care system that provides affordable options for families with children from birth through school age. Families would select from a range of child care options that meets their child’s needs and reflects their values; is culturally and linguistically responsive; is inclusive of children with disabilities; and accommodates their work, school, or training schedule. This might be a child care center, family child care home, public school, after-school or summer program, or a relative or family friend. No matter the setting, parents would pay on a sliding scale based on their ability to pay, and early educators would earn a living wage. Moreover, parents would have peace of mind knowing that while they are working, their children are safe and well cared for because early educators would have resources to meet quality benchmarks appropriate to the setting and age group.

The importance of child care in the United States

In America today, two-thirds of children from birth through age 12 have all available parents in the workforce.¹ As a result, about 15.7 million young children regularly spend time in the care of someone other than their parent,² making the need for child care—and the financial costs that come with it—a reality for most families with young children. Child care needs might become less intense when children start school, though one study found that schools are closed for an average of 29 days during the school year.³ That alone far exceeds paid days off for a typical U.S. worker—and doesn't even include summer break.

Whether child care is paid or unpaid, women primarily take on the bulk of caregiving responsibilities within families and in the paid child care market. Valuing caregiving and the critical role that it plays in shaping early learning—and investing accordingly—would dramatically expand choices and opportunities for women and their families. Many more parents would join the workforce or pursue additional education and training if child care were available.⁴

Children would benefit immensely from a culture shift and public investment that expands economic opportunities for their families and provides access to quality early learning opportunities in a variety of child care settings. Brain science confirms that early experiences affect all aspects of children's development and that children need a child care setting that is safe and enriching to support them in developing foundational skills that set the stage for their future success.⁵ Given that so many children spend a significant portion of their early years in child care settings, brain development and early learning unfold in child care. Care and learning are thus inseparable functions that occur simultaneously.

Defining ‘early educators’

People who work in child care go by different names, including but not limited to: child care workers; teachers; family child care providers; nannies; family, friend, and neighbor providers; and relatives. But the work they do looks similar across child care settings. They care for young children as they teach them fundamental skills that set the stage for learning and development throughout the life span. Thus, for the purposes of this report, the population of people who provide child care to young child from birth to age 5, as well as people who provide child care for school-age children, are referred to as early educators. Regardless of the child care setting, payment arrangements, or relationship to the child, every adult who provides direct care to children is an early educator, shaping their young brains from the start. Some early educators might not even see themselves as such because the child care arrangement is a function of the relationship with the family, such as when a relative is the primary child care provider. Nevertheless, they are educating young children and fall within this category.

The work of early educators has never been more important. Young children in the United States represent the country’s most diverse generation yet. Among children younger than age 5, there is no majority race or ethnicity.⁶ One-quarter of young children live in households with at least one immigrant parent, and 93 percent of these children were themselves born in the United States.⁷ One-third of children live in a household where English is not the primary spoken language.⁸ Our children’s diversity is our strength. These children are poised to contribute unique talents, skills, and ideals to the nation’s shared prosperity, which is especially important as the United States looks to replace the workforce as the aging Baby Boomer generation retires. This cohort of young children represents the country’s future workforce, and their diversity will create a pipeline of leaders equipped to compete in the global economy. To reach this potential, however, we must invest to support their success from birth, rather than miss this important opportunity.

Right now, young children also have the highest poverty rate of any age cohort in the country.⁹ This trend is due in no small part to structural racism, which means children of color and children in immigrant families are more likely to grow up in families who are poor or living paycheck to paycheck. Nearly one-quarter of young children live below the poverty level, and nearly half are in low-income families.¹⁰ Economic insecurity is exacerbated by the costs of raising young children—including child care costs—that parents face early in their career when wages are lowest and they have had little time to accumulate savings.

Current U.S. policy, however, is out of step with these realities. Despite clear evidence that high-quality child care is a necessity for working families and that the first five years of life are critical to a child's development, the federal government does not treat early childhood education as a public good nor does it provide adequate funding to support it. This chronic underfunding has led to a shortage of affordable, quality child care across the nation.¹¹ And to the extent that child care is affordable for families, it is largely because early educators earn very low wages,¹² and many must struggle to feed their own families.¹³

Families with children younger than age 5 tend to feel the financial and logistical stress that comes with inadequate child care most acutely, but many families also struggle to find options that provide a safe learning environment during the many hours and weeks when school is closed and families need to work. Beyond the direct impact on families with children, child care affects all Americans who benefit from increased economic growth and a strong future workforce.

Given the centrality of child care in the lives of millions of American children and families and its potential to boost economic prosperity, it is no wonder that it is a winning policy issue. Early childhood investments are a popular and unifying issue for American voters. Support for early childhood programs—as well as the candidates who champion them—is high among voters and crosses demographic and partisan lines. In fact, early childhood education receives broad support from voters across the political spectrum, with 70 percent of voters overall saying they are more likely to vote for a candidate who supports child care and early education.¹⁴ Support for child care investments is especially strong among parents and women of color. Notably, majorities of Democrats, Republicans, and independents also support child care investment. Overall, the vast majority of voters say that they are more likely to vote for a candidate who supports investments in child care and early learning. Voters also largely believe that government has a role to play in solving America's child care crisis and would support efforts in Congress to increase access to those programs. In a polarized political climate, investing in child care and early education stands out as a bipartisan issue.

TABLE 1
Child care is a popular issue among diverse voters

| | All voters | Parents | African American women | Latino women | White noncollege-educated women |
|---|------------|---------|------------------------|--------------|---------------------------------|
| More likely to vote for a candidate who supports increased funding for child care assistance and to expand access to early childhood education* | 69% | 77% | 80% | 78% | 68% |
| Would support efforts in Congress to increase funding for child care assistance and to expand access to early childhood learning** | 78% | 81% | 85% | 84% | 76% |
| Support guaranteeing child care assistance to low-income and middle-class families on a sliding scale based on household income | 81% | 84% | 93% | 88% | 85% |
| Support limiting child care payments to 7 percent of a family's income | 69% | 74% | 77% | 76% | 73% |
| Support ensuring people who work in child care earn a living wage and are paid a salary comparable to elementary school teachers if they have the same credentials and experience | 84% | 85% | 95% | 90% | 89% |

* These data include participants who selected "Much more likely to vote for this candidate" and "Somewhat more likely to vote for this candidate."

** These data include participants who selected "Strongly support" and "Somewhat support."

Source: John Halpin, Karl Agne, and Margie Omero, "Affordable Child Care and Early Learning for All Families: A National Public Opinion Study" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2018), available at <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2018/09/12074422/ChildCarePolling-report.pdf>. Some of these results can be found in unpublished research from the same poll, on file with the Center for American Progress.

Bipartisan momentum to improve safety and affordability of child care has also been building among national and state policymakers. Federal lawmakers have made progress to improve important safety protections and quality standards for the nation's child care assistance program and in 2018 prioritized the passage of the largest funding increase for child care in the nation's history.¹⁵

Governors from both political parties have raised access to early childhood education as a priority for their administrations, and in fiscal year 2019, governors collectively proposed \$3 billion in funding for early childhood education.¹⁶ States particularly have led on preschool, which is a vital part of any comprehensive solution addressing the child care and educational needs of young children. The progress that a handful of states and municipalities have made on universal pre-K is encouraging, and policymakers must build on this success to ensure all young children—including infants and toddlers—have access to high-quality early learning experiences.

While this progress is promising, the United States needs comprehensive child care reform, with investments at scale to address the current crisis and to ensure that all children have access to safe, quality care environments; all families can afford care that meets their family's needs; and all early educators earn a living wage.

The many benefits of a large-scale child care investment

The benefits of investing in child care affect children, families, and all Americans who have a stake in a strong economy and future workforce. Affordable, quality child care helps families find and keep a job and increases their take-home pay, all while supporting learning and healthy development for a generation of young children.

Right now, the U.S. economy loses an astounding \$57 billion per year in revenue, wages, and productivity as a result of child care problems.¹⁷ This figure does not begin to capture the cost to families who forgo job and educational opportunities and face the daily stress that comes with making child care payments on time; finding child care arrangements in areas where few options exist or during nontraditional hours when most programs are closed; or when child care arrangements fall through.

Perhaps most disconcerting is that the United States can afford a child care investment that meets families' needs and values the important work of early educators. As measured by a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), the United States has the third-lowest spending level of Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries.¹⁸ A robust child care investment would cost approximately the same as the current economic loss attributed to child care¹⁹ as well as improve quality of life for millions of American families and create a more equitable society where all children benefit from early learning opportunities.

Access to high-quality child care beginning in the early years sets children on a path for success in school and beyond

Early childhood is a critical period of development. Young children's brains develop more rapidly in early childhood than at any other point in life, forming more than 1 million new neural connections per second.²⁰ Young children absorb language and learn to understand their environment in the context of interactions with trusted adults.²¹

Child care is early learning

Child care and early learning occur simultaneously in child care settings across the country. Take, for example, a simple interaction that occurs in child care settings across the country on any given day: A family child care provider changes a baby's diaper and talks to him as she does so, looking him in the eyes and smiling when he makes eye contact. He coos and makes a disgruntled face. She responds saying, "Yes, I know, these wipes are a little cold, let me warm them up" and rubs the wipe in her hands. The baby coos again and together, they mimic a conversation. As she finishes up, the baby tries to wiggle away. She shakes a brightly colored toy with rich patterns in his line of vision to get his attention and lets him grab the toy and put it in his mouth. In less than a minute, this family child care provider has not only met the baby's physical care needs, but she has also stimulated parts of his brain responsible for linguistics, vocabulary, socio-emotional functioning, and visual and tactile development. These connections set the foundation for future learning, health, and behavior. Ensuring that children build strong relationships and spend time in stimulating environments during this pivotal period of development can help give them a strong start in life, making investments in quality early learning programs ripe with potential.²²

Child care is early learning, meaning that high-quality child care supports children's healthy development and teaches fundamental skills that set children up for success in school and beyond. High-quality child care programs have a positive impact on very young children's health and development, in particular low-income and other vulnerable young children,²³ and a growing body of research reveals both short- and long-term improvements in health outcome as the result of participation in early childhood education.²⁴ Mounting research confirms that children who spend time in high-quality early learning environments enter kindergarten with higher levels of cognitive and social emotional development and are better prepared for kindergarten. They are also more likely to graduate from high school and to be employed as adults.²⁵ Meanwhile, children who lack these opportunities have already fallen behind. In fact, differences in children's cognitive abilities by income appear as early as 9 months old,²⁶ and by the time children enter kindergarten, half of the achievement gap that exists in high school is already present.²⁷

Beyond early childhood, child care in the after-school hours and summer months provides safe and enriching experiences that build knowledge outside of the classroom. In particular, the summer months can result in what is known as summer learning loss, when children lose gains in reading and other academic skills learned during the school year.²⁸

Investing in child care increases families' earnings and promotes financial security today

American families spend a significant portion of their household budgets on child care, averaging \$250 per week for families who have children younger than age 5 and who pay for child care.²⁹ For families with school-age children, summer child care costs an average of \$3,000, or 20 percent of household income during the summer months.³⁰ Along with other costs of working, income spent on child care decreases the resources families have to spend on other necessities.

Parents, particularly mothers, who have access to reliable, affordable child care are more likely to participate in the labor force and experience fewer career interruptions due to child care challenges.³¹ In 2016 alone, nearly 2 million parents had to quit a job or make career sacrifices because of problems with child care,³² and every year, working families lose out on more than \$8 billion in wages due to lack of affordable child care.³³ Among families with school-age children, 6 in 10 parents report making job sacrifices that affect their income to cover child care in the summer.³⁴ The absence of any national paid family leave or paid sick days law further intensifies the child care crisis for families.

Investing in child care boosts short- and long-term economic growth

Investing in children now will pay dividends in the long term. Recent economic analysis shows that high-quality care from birth to age 5 yields a return on public investments of 13 percent annually, including better outcomes in education, earnings, and health. Moreover, boys in families with low incomes who participated in poor-quality care regressed in their development, underscoring the importance of ensuring that quality care is widely accessible.³⁵ Research based on high-quality early childhood programs have found that for every \$1 invested in early childhood education, there is a \$4 to \$9 return to society over the course of a child's life.³⁶

Child care investments pay off for businesses, too. Employees who have children need care so that they can come to work each day, and a business is most productive when employees have consistent access to high-quality child care. When they have problems arranging child care, parents may have to cut back on hours at work or leave their jobs altogether. High turnover and employee recruitment and training costs can add up for employers. In fact, American businesses lose an estimated \$12.7 billion each year due to child care challenges.³⁷

Washington, D.C., serves as a model of what can happen when communities invest in early education, as universal preschool resulted in a 10 percentage-point increase in maternal labor force participation.³⁸ Economists suggest that a significant investment in child care would increase women's overall labor force participation enough to boost GDP by roughly \$210 billion, or 1.2 percent.³⁹ A major investment in child care and early learning would create an estimated 2.3 million new jobs, as well as provide opportunities for predominantly low-income parents to return to the workforce.⁴⁰

Expanding child care and boosting wages for early educators can support job expansion in a sector of the economy with growing need that can never be automated or outsourced overseas, as well as advance racial, gender, and economic equity for the existing and future early childhood workforce. Ensuring that child care workers can join a union will help to boost wages and benefits and give them agency to improve working conditions and quality of child care. Unions have won tens of millions of dollars in new funding for workforce professional development, higher pay, and expanded access to child care for families.⁴¹ Yet, the vast majority of early educators are not in unions due to structural barriers that prevent membership, meaning they do not have access to higher wages and professional development opportunities that membership can provide.⁴²

Child care reform in the military

The U.S. military child care system, administered by the U.S. Department of Defense, is an often cited example of how policymakers can improve affordability, quality, and wages through reform efforts. In 1982, a General Accounting Office report found that military child care did not even meet basic health and safety expectations, much less education quality standards.⁴³ The report also found that child care providers had the lowest-paid job within military installations. These findings resulted in congressional action and long-term efforts to improve child care for military children and families.

The Military Child Care Act of 1989 mandated reforms that included: training for early educators and increased pay comparable to other positions on the military base; a training and curriculum specialist in all centers; new child care positions to increase the size of the early childhood workforce; a sliding scale payment schedule for families based on their income; measures to prevent child abuse and neglect; and parent boards to advise child care centers.⁴⁴ Both funding and quality improvement efforts targeted child care centers and home-based child care to expand options for parents. Importantly, new requirements also came with a significant boost in federal funding. Both military child care centers and homes have improved health and safety standards and are subject to regular inspections. All military programs must meet standards established by a national early childhood accrediting body.⁴⁵ Ninety-seven percent of military child care centers and homes have met these standards via accreditation through organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association for Family Child Care.⁴⁶

Today, educators on military bases are paid on a wage scale that averages \$15 per hour, which is about \$4 more than the national average hourly wage for those in civilian settings.⁴⁷ Military parents still pay no more than 10 percent of their income on child care, with federal funding subsidizing remaining operating costs.⁴⁸ Reform efforts—and long-term funding—in military child care demonstrate how a concerted effort to improve child care and federal investment can boost quality, increase pay, provide more options to families, and lower costs.

Child care is important for advancing gender and racial equity

Child care is critical to achieving racial and gender equity. Women, and particularly women of color, are considerably more likely to live in poverty because of systemic racism and sexism, which contributes to the historical and ongoing undervaluing of both paid and unpaid caregiving. As discussed above, the lack of access to child care limits women's ability to enter, stay, or participate more fully in the labor market.

Investing in child care is an important piece of addressing women's poverty, which is often driven by a lack of support for both caregiving and work-family policies such as child care, paid leave, and predictably and flexible work schedules. More than 22 million women lived in poverty in 2017. More than 2 in 5, or 46 percent, of these women lived in extreme poverty. Black, Latinx, and Native women experience poverty at higher rates relative to all women.⁴⁹ As a whole, women earn less money than men, making \$0.80 for every dollar earned by men, with Black, Native American, and Latina women earning much less than white women.⁵⁰ Women, and particularly women of color, are overrepresented in low-wage jobs, which are often accompanied by unpredictable and inadequate work hours.⁵¹ Access to child care could enable more of these women to work and gain greater financial security, as well as improve jobs for early educators.

Early educators are an essential part of the U.S. economy, providing a critical support for families and children, but earn poverty-level wages that undermine their own economic security and their ability to provide high-quality care. This is particularly acute for women, who make up 93 percent of the child care workforce.⁵² Women of color are overrepresented in the child care workforce and comprise 40 percent of early educators in regulated child care centers and homes and half of home-based paid child care providers who operate outside the licensed child care system.⁵³ Immigrant women are a critical component of the early childhood workforce. One in 5 early educators is an immigrant, and the number of immigrants in the early childhood workforce has tripled over the last 20 years.⁵⁴ As more families include working parents and require child care, it is largely immigrant women who are responding to the demand. Yet, typical wages in the child care industry leave more than 1 in 6 women who are early educators living below the poverty line, and this statistic is even worse for women of color.⁵⁵ Women of color in child care are also less likely to have jobs that offer benefits or opportunities for professional development and advancement.⁵⁶ Increasing investments in child care is a critical step, along with crafting policies and implementation practices that advance racial and gender equity.

The current state of child care in the United States

The current child care system falls short of meeting the needs of children, families, and early educators. Most of these problems stem from chronic underfunding. Because the federal government does not invest significantly in early childhood education, families are largely responsible for covering the cost of child care. Families cannot afford to pay more, and quality and wages cannot improve without a significant public investment.

Child care is unaffordable for many families

Child care costs are consuming a growing portion of families' incomes, particularly for low-income families, as the price of child care has steadily increased while American's wages have stagnated.⁵⁷

- Full-time center-based child care costs an average of \$10,000 per child,⁵⁸ which amounts to about one-fifth of the median household's income in the United States.⁵⁹
- In more than half of states, child care for an infant in a child care center costs more than in-state college tuition.⁶⁰
- Families of color are especially feeling the burden of paying for child care.⁶¹ For example, while African American mothers work at particularly high rates, they also pay a larger share of their income toward child care compared with white families.⁶² Child care subsidies, funded by the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant, are designed to defray costs for low-income working families. However, limited funding means that just 1 in 6 eligible children actually receives child care assistance. In particular, Latinx and Asian children are underserved in the current child care subsidy system.⁶³

Child care is difficult to find

All families should have the ability to choose from a variety of high-quality, culturally responsive early educators, as well as to select a program that best meets their family's needs. However, since child care providers primarily rely on revenue from family tuition payments, many cannot afford to operate in low-income neighborhoods or rural areas with a dispersed population.

- Four in 5 parents with young children say that finding quality, affordable child care is a serious problem in their area.⁶⁴
- Half of Americans live in a child care desert, or areas where young children significantly outnumber available licensed child care slots.⁶⁵
- Certain families face additional barriers to finding child care, including low-income families; families of infants and toddlers; families who work nontraditional hours; families with a child or family member with a disability; immigrant and families with limited English proficiency.⁶⁶

Early educators earn very low wages

Early educators deserve wages and benefits that reflect the value of their work—in supporting both young children's development and economic productivity. Unfortunately, those caring for and educating the country's children are working long hours for low wages and few benefits. Most are not unionized and lack a voice in their profession.

- In the United States, there are approximately 2 million paid early educators who work in a variety of settings with children from birth until they start kindergarten around age 5.⁶⁷
- The median wage for an early educator in the United States is just \$11 per hour,⁶⁸ and half of early childhood educators need some form of public assistance to meet their own families' basic needs.⁶⁹
- Just 37 percent of center-based early educators have employer-sponsored health insurance, and 23 percent are uninsured. Lack of health insurance especially affects African American early educators, who are less likely to be employed by child care centers that offer health insurance and of whom 31 percent are uninsured.⁷⁰

Transforming potential into policy action

Learning begins at birth, meaning that families need access to important supports starting in the first few days of parenthood and spanning through the school-age years when families need care in the hours beyond the school day. Comprehensive early childhood policies that serve families beginning in the prenatal period can help set children on a path for success from the start. Child care is one piece of a comprehensive approach, which should also include home visiting, preschool, early intervention, and financial supports for families with young children. Moreover, child care is just one part of a policy agenda for working families, who also need additional policies that simultaneously promote economic security such as comprehensive paid family and medical leave, paid sick days, fair work schedules, and increases in the minimum wage. Child care policy must be part of a broader economic package that centers the economic well-being of working families.

Important principles for policy development

Any policy aimed at addressing the nation's child care crisis must advance equity and simultaneously address the following components: affordability, compensation and job quality, program quality, and access. Seeking to address one without considering the others can have unintended consequences: For example, a child care tax credit that gives families resources to pay for child care but does nothing to address compensation, quality, or child care supply will not address the needs of children, families, or early educators who are currently ill served by the existing child care system. Likewise, expanding access to preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds is beneficial and important, but it does not fully address the child care needs of families with infants and toddlers and before- and after-school care for school-age children.

Moreover, families need direct assistance—beyond what a traditional tax credit can provide—to help pay their child care bill when it comes due each week or month. Families living paycheck to paycheck cannot afford to wait a year or more to get the help they need to pay for child care. Child care proposals need to consider systemic

reform that addresses wages, quality, and access holistically, and these reforms go beyond what an annual tax benefit can provide.

Affordability: Child care policy should reduce families' child care costs, targeting the most assistance to families with the lowest incomes and providing direct assistance so that families can pay their child care bill when it comes due.

Compensation and job quality: Child care policy must ensure a living wage as a floor, and pay parity with elementary school teachers with equivalent credentials and experience should be the benchmark for early educators. Policies must also reduce barriers to joining unions and provide opportunities for workers to have a voice in determining compensation, working conditions, and other policies that directly affect them.

Quality: Child care policy should give resources to providers to support high-quality child care, including funding to pay a living wage to staff, provide professional development opportunities, and implement required safety standards and trainings. Importantly, funding for quality must precede additional requirements. Efforts to improve program quality must include a focus on making sure existing early educators, particularly in underserved communities, have the supports necessary to meet new requirements.

Access: Families need to be able to access child care when and where they need it, in the setting that they prefer. Historically underserved populations—including children who are low income, disabled, in the foster care system, or dual-language learners; children who experience homelessness; children of color; children who are LGBTQ or in families that include LGBTQ people; children who are being raised by grandparents or other relatives, living on tribal lands, or living in rural areas; infants and toddlers; and those requiring care during nontraditional hours—have not been well served by the existing child care market or child care subsidy system. Promoting equitable access requires identifying the specific needs and barriers for underserved populations and eliminating child care deserts to ensure that all families have proximity to affordable, high-quality child care.

Policy benchmarks

Growing public investments in child care—including preschool, after-school, and summer care—is critical to our national policy agenda. Any child care policy or proposal should include:

- **Lower child care costs for low- and moderate-income families** to no more than 7 percent of income through a sliding scale that provides the most assistance for families living paycheck to paycheck, per the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' affordability guidelines.⁷¹ Capping costs at 7 percent of income, but also using a sliding scale to determine how much families should pay, is a way to ensure that lower-earning families do not pay as much toward care. Families living in poverty and those living paycheck to paycheck should not have a copayment of any kind, as they need to maximize the funds they have for other basic needs. Child care assistance should be easy for families to access and should be provided on an ongoing basis as families incur child care costs.
- **Provide flexibility to accommodate complex work schedules** by increasing availability of care for nontraditional hours and volatile schedules by allowing families to choose the care of their choice in a center, home, or after-school or summer program. Oftentimes, home-based child care providers can best meet the needs of parents who work nontraditional hours and need additional investment to be financially solvent and serve more children in the evenings and on weekends.
- **Increase options for families by building supply and addressing child care deserts**, especially for families who have been historically underserved by the current child care system. Increasing funding for child care and establishing payment rates that adequately cover the cost of high-quality child care will improve the financial solvency of child care providers who often operate on very thin profit margins, thus expanding the early childhood workforce and child care supply. This must ensure enough supply of high-quality options for families, whether in a center, family child care home, school-age program, or with a family, friend, or neighbor. In addition, states and communities need funding to construct and renovate child care facilities,

help more home-based providers become licensed, and provide business support to providers. It also includes supports for providers to be inclusive of all children and families, including families for whom English is a second language and parents and children with disabilities.

- **Ensure child care programs are accessible to children and adults with disabilities.** Child care homes and centers must be inclusive of children and family members with disabilities, which includes physical accessibility. In addition, the program components such as curriculum, family engagement and communication, and staff training must also be inclusive of disabled people. In addition, both early educators and program administrators need specialized staff trainings to support them in creating inclusive programs. All of these components require dedicated funding, and children with disabilities need higher levels of child care assistance to meet specialized needs. In addition, people with disabilities must be represented in policy decision-making processes, especially to advise on inclusive policies.
- **Expand high-quality options available to families** by promoting quality standards and fair compensation and giving providers the resources and the supports to improve. Payment rates for child care providers must be based on the estimated cost of providing high-quality child care. Given that compensation and working conditions are critical to child care quality, wage and compensation standards—and the cost—must be built into payment rates. Tiered rating systems can provide a path for improving quality but must be developed and implemented to promote equitable access to high-quality child care. This means that quality standards are accompanied by funding that precedes any expectation of meeting new standards; provides support for providers achieve quality in both home, center-based, and school-age child care settings; acknowledges differences between home- and center-based child care; and allows for a reasonable timeline for making improvements.
- **Improve compensation, working conditions, and professional development opportunities for early educators.** Every early educator deserves a living wage and parity with K-12 teachers for commensurate levels of education, experience, and competency. Early educators should also have access to benefits that include health insurance, paid time off, and retirement plans. Early educators also need support for professional development, especially if they are expected to seek additional credentials or education. Improving compensation, benefits, and professional development for child care workers is essential to advancing racial and gender equity, alongside retaining a well-qualified, culturally and linguistically responsive workforce that can provide high-quality care to children.

- **Affirm the right of early educators to join a union.** Providing more opportunities for frontline workers to join unions can also address wages and working conditions, as well as give a voice to early educators. To successfully professionalize the early childhood workforce, unions must have a meaningful seat at the table with federal, state, and local governments and agencies, as well as policymakers. Elected leaders should identify and address barriers to participation in such organizations and enact policies to ensure that all members of the profession have the opportunity to join a union. This could include policies to allow providers who care for children receiving public funding to bargain with the government across the child care and early education sector on policies such as payment rates. Lawmakers should also partner with unions on strategies, such as labor management training and professional development partnerships, that can help to retain a qualified workforce, boost the quality of services provided to families, and create advancement pathways within the industry.
- **Provide a platform for input from early educators and families directly affected by child care policy** by creating structures for input from multiple stakeholders. Families who have been historically underserved—including people of color, people with disabilities, immigrant families, and low-income families—should be well represented in stakeholder and advisory groups and should have ongoing opportunities for input to ensure that policies and programs reflect their interests and needs. Labor unions representing early educators should also be part of this process.

Conclusion

A large-scale investment in child care is a win-win for children, families, and the economy. Mounting evidence shows that few other investments pay off in both the short and long term. As elected leaders seek to address seemingly intractable issues, including improving educational outcomes, economic and racial equity, and economic growth, child care investments coupled with policy design and implementation that advance equity are an obvious solution and one that already enjoys bipartisan support. It's time for elected officials and those seeking office to lead a national conversation with policy ideas that capitalize on the opportunity to invest in children from birth. Such an investment will improve the well-being of children and families by reducing stress for families, helping children access high-quality early learning experiences that prepare them for school, and improving job quality for millions of workers. American families will lose out, and the economy will suffer, the longer policymakers wait to act.

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