CHILD CARE FOR ALL:
Finding the Will and the Way
“All Americans can be proud that we have more women in the workforce than ever before,” President Donald Trump declared this year in his State of the Union address. “No one has benefited more from our thriving economy than women, who filled 58 percent of newly created jobs last year,” he said as Vice President Mike Pence applauded for women in the crowd. At that moment, cameras panned to the U.S. House, where several rows of female lawmakers rose to their feet and cheered. Many were freshman Democrats, among the record number of Democratic women elected to Congress last year. In a rare bipartisan moment, lawmakers of both genders pumped their fists and roared. But no one brought up the pressing questions that loomed over the celebration. Who is providing care and education for the children as more women and men advance in the workplace? And how will early childhood educators gain the respect, equity and pay they deserve?

THE CRUSHING BURDEN OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

America’s families — in many cases mothers — wring their hands as they wrestle with the issue of early child care. In 2018, child care costs increased for the fifth straight year, and one in three households now spend 20 percent of their income to have someone else educate and care for their children.1 It’s a crushing burden, as moms pointed out in response to recent surveys.2

“I couldn’t afford to work, and I couldn’t afford not to work,” one mother complained.3 “I love being a parent, but the cost of child care is so expensive,” another griped.4 “You use up basically your full paycheck on child care and then you’re not there. As much as they’re learning, you’re not there to see all that, and it kills you,” yet another of the moms moaned.5

The high cost of quality childhood care and education also threatens to deal a lethal blow to the country’s productivity and economic growth. Nearly two-thirds of U.S. mothers are now holding jobs, so early childhood care and education play a vital role in the workplace.6 Employees with reliable, quality child care have fewer absences, less turnover and greater job satisfaction. Their children are better off, too, since the ones who attend good preschools grow up to be wealthier, healthier and more law-abiding as adults.7 Quality early childhood care and education help the workforce of today and tomorrow, yet demand exceeds supply as families face skyrocketing costs and a shrinking pool of child care educators and workers. Despite a booming U.S. economy, the economics of child care are broken.8
When new parents are thrust back into the job market, society also expects them to shop around for child care in a country with no uniform standards for quality or safety. Though nearly 11 million children, half of them under age one, spend about 27 hours a week in an early childhood care and education setting, the burden is on parents — often the mothers — to navigate a confusing, unaccountable and typically private system pieced together state by state for some of the smallest, most vulnerable members of our country. Once a family finds a convenient, viable option, they’re likely to encounter a wait list since laws regulate how many children childhood care and education centers can accept. Some parents resort to offering extra money or other inducements while pleading for a slot — a not infrequent practice that child care centers call “cold-crying.”

SNAGS IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION SYSTEM

Licensed childhood care and education centers are either geographically or financially out of reach for most U.S. families, a conundrum that’s especially pronounced in the child care deserts of America’s rural heartland. The shortage is also acute in our cities’ low-income neighborhoods, though economically disadvantaged children are the ones who benefit most. Low-income families should enjoy adequate subsidies under the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), the single largest source of early childhood education funding in the country. But the chronically under-resourced program has failed to keep up with the true costs of giving our young ones the quality care and education they need.

DEserting OUR YOUNGEST CHILDREN

Parents across the country are discovering that they live in “child care deserts,” communities where there are no licensed child care centers for children under 5 or less than one slot in licensed centers for children 0 to 5. According to a recent report from the Center for American Progress, demand exceeds supply in 9 states — Indiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Montana, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Vermont, and West Virginia — and in Washington, DC. More specifically, there are 19 counties — all of them mostly or completely rural — across the 6 states that have no licensed child care settings for infants or toddlers. Of the 547 counties included in the study, only 20 have a slot for 1 in 3 children under age 3.

While 51 percent of Americans reside in child care deserts, the deserts vary by income level and state. More than 75 percent of Utah neighborhoods are located in child care deserts. Meanwhile fewer than 23 percent of Maine neighborhoods are. Families in rural areas have the greatest problem finding licensed child education and care. Similarly, low-income urban neighborhoods are also more likely to be child care deserts.

The shortage of licensed care is especially challenging for Latino families. Sixty percent of Latino families live in regions that have an undersupply of licensed child care options, according to the report. The researchers also found that immigrant Latino households with children under 3 had significantly less access to licensed care than those in native-born Latino households. And considering that Latinos are the fastest-growing group in our nation, these figures only underscore the tragic fact that we are deserting our children by failing to give them the quality care and education they need.
In theory, states set reimbursement rates for subsidized childhood care and education by conducting periodic market surveys of private pay rates and follow the federal government’s recommendation that public rates approach or reach the 75th percentile of the private market. In practice, most states fail to meet this standard and instead pay closer to 50 percent of the private market. The last time Maryland hit the 75 percent mark was in 2001, and the subsidy now covers only the least expensive 9 percent of childhood care and education centers in the state. In Pennsylvania, the pool of funding is capped because much of it similarly goes to pay for low-quality services, regardless of the number of income-eligible children on waiting lists in the state. Philadelphia alone has more than 19,000 disadvantaged 3- to 5-year-olds who can’t access quality, licensed care.

“With having a growing family to attend to, this field is not paying for all the expenses, including loans taken to receive a degree in the field. Early childhood education is super important, but it’s really annoying how underpaid we are compared with other teachers (from grade school on up). We do the same amount of work, if not more, and put in longer hours. Some things do not add up. I have been seriously contemplating going back to school for something else, but I’m still in the education field since this is my calling without doubt.”

But it’s hard to follow your chosen path when you can’t put food on the table, as other educators also point out.

“I love the job but I can’t afford to live on it,” said a woman from Washington State. “A lot of our teachers have second incomes from second jobs because it’s impossible to live on these wages.” And the irony of this impossible pay, said a former educator from New York, is that people in her field work very hard. “I do not know a single teacher who hasn’t given up lunch breaks or taken work home to do into the wee hours of the morning after putting their own children to bed. It’s a hell of a lot to demand of people who are making $20,320 a year, the national median wage for early childhood teachers, which is below the poverty threshold for a family of four.”

Many early childhood educators are angry — and they won’t take it anymore. The average turnover is 30 percent and may reach as high as 44 percent as educators quit the field. Many of them go to teach
PRINCIPLES TO PROFESSIONALIZE THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE

Numerous scientific studies have shown that the period from birth to age 5 is vital for brain development and learning.¹ The growing body of evidence makes it a no-brainer to realize we must take vigorous steps to give the early childhood workforce the respect, equity and pay it deserves. As we confront the child care crisis, we should act on four guiding principles to lead change for the early childhood profession:

» **Respect:** Acknowledge and demonstrate absolute dignity for practitioners. Professionalizing the field should focus on professional capital rather than individual worker shortcomings and not keep asking educators to simply wait for change.

» **Competence:** Define the observable and measurable behaviors of characteristics that articulate the field’s distinctive contributions. We must build early childhood education as a challenging discipline using communities of practice and a new vision for higher education.

» **Strengths:** Decide what is essential to retain and bring forward — and map and retain its assets. As professional mastery increases, the soft skills may matter more than ever in practitioner performance.

» **Equity:** Address disparities, exercise power with others, protect the rights of colleagues and serve as an instrument of professional cohesion. Professionalizing the field must include a focus on equity and social justice, along with a willingness to be disturbed.²

The Council for Professional Recognition puts these ideals into action by administering the Child Development Associate (CDA®) national credentialing program. Based on a core set of competency standards, the CDA program is a vital part of advancement in early childhood education and care. Practitioners who earn a CDA have knowledge of best practices for working with young children, greater commitment to their careers and a stronger connection to the community of early childhood educators who are advocating for their field.

Kindergarten in public schools, which also have record turnover rates due to tight budgets, lack of staff support and a rise in incidents of violence.²² These downsides notwithstanding, public kindergartens offer higher pay and benefits than preschools, and they are attracting some of the most seasoned members of the early childhood workforce. As centers scramble to fill vacant spots, they often hire less educated staff, leading to a decline in the overall quality of learning.

Both parents and children lose out, according to a former Colorado educator who quit the field after seven years for a job with partial health benefits and two weeks of vacation. “People don’t realize everything that goes into what we do, and I really want people to know. I want it to be important because it is,” she said. “We serve this young population and we’re making it possible for like 80 percent of our population to be at work.”²³
THE BUSINESS CASE FOR BETTER EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

Some prominent business leaders are getting the message that early childhood education matters for both our current and future workforce. Amazon’s Jeff Bezos recently announced that he would invest $2 billion to create a network of free Montessori schools for underserved children. Warren Buffett has established the Buffett Institute at the University of Nebraska and formed an Early Childhood Workforce Commission to address challenges ranging from the statewide shortage of educators to a lack of professional training and paltry wages.25

Action and innovation now will strengthen the workforce today and for years to come, according to Ready Nation, a bipartisan network of business executives across industries nationwide. The network is committed to promoting smart investments in America’s children and recently wrote a letter to Congress in which it made the business case for more and better child care.26

“The child care crisis,” the network told Congress, “is costing our economy a staggering $57 billion each year. As business leaders, we recognize that this lost productivity is hindering economic growth and harming both employers and employees. As the 116th Congress progresses, we urge you to set up the economy for long-term successes by enacting policies that meaningfully improve our nation’s child care system.” It was high time to take “a historic step by improving child care access and affordability.”27

UNCLE SAM STEPS IN

As we look to tomorrow, we should heed history’s lessons and recall how government once responded to a childhood care and education crisis of the past. During World War II, more and more men found themselves on the front lines, leaving ammunition factories short on workers. In response, 6.5 million American women joined the labor force, leaving millions of young children without someone to educate or care for them at home. So who took care of Rosie the Riveter’s young ones while she did her patriotic duty? The government did by swiftly amending the Lanham Act, a 1940 law that allowed for war-related grants. In 1942, Uncle Sam provided money to establish federally subsidized child care centers that operated nationwide and served families at all income levels.28

By the end of the war, between 550,000 and 600,000 children received some care from the Lanham Act, and a report issued at the time showed tremendous satisfaction with the centers. More than 80 percent of respondents had positive views, while nearly 90 percent said the centers should be set up in every school district and made available to both working and stay-at-home moms.29

In a more recent take on the far-reaching program, Christopher Herbst of Arizona State University explored how the program affected children.

“They were more likely to be employed, have higher earnings, and less likely to need cash assistance as adults,” he concluded. “In addition, the benefits of the program accrued largely to the most economically disadvantaged individuals” — just like they do today.30
Despite the evident pluses of the program, the government cut off funding for the centers as the war came to a close. Many women who had entered the workforce as a result of the war remained in the workforce after the war, and women — especially poor women and women of color — who had held jobs long before the war continued to work outside the home. By 1950, there were three times as many working mothers as there had been before the war, amounting to 33.9 percent of women in the paid workforce. Yet public opinion leaned heavily against this trend in time of peace.

**PUTTING CHILDREN ON THE POLITICAL AGENDA**

But the tide of public opinion has turned as more and more women bring home the bacon from their jobs. In a 2016 bipartisan national poll, 82 percent of Republicans, 86 percent of Independents and 98 percent of Democrats said that “making early education and child care more affordable for working parents to give children a strong start” is important for our country.

Voters of all ages and all political parties overwhelmingly back proposals to provide sliding-scale support for working parents to afford good early childhood care and education, to increase standards and oversight in child care settings, and to improve the professionalization and pay of the child care workforce. By large margins, voters also are more likely to back candidates for office who favor increased funding for these and similar steps.

Some of these voters have ramped up their efforts to put the needs of our youngest children on the political agenda. Groundwork, Ohio, Child Care Resources and Referral Association, Ohio Association for the Education of Young Children and Southwest Ohio Association for the Education of Young Children have formed the Ohio Equitable Access Coalition, a group of early childhood educators recently united behind a common policy agenda and committed to advocate for increased quality and access to early education programs in the FY 20-21 state budget. In Michigan, parents from Detroit, Flint and Grand Rapids have made plans to converge on Lansing for an “Early Education 101” session with lawmakers, the first significant early childhood event to be held in the state capital in about a decade.

“We decided to do this together so we can speak with a collective voice,” said a spokeswoman for the group who runs an early childhood center in Flint. “These are not just Detroit or Flint concerns.”

They’re pressing national issues that demand action from all who care about children. And the early childhood workforce should pitch in, according to the Council for Professional Recognition, a Washington, DC, nonprofit that promotes improved performance and recognition of professionals in the early childhood field. The Council believes educators should take up the mission to help the public understand the value of early education and those who teach young children. To help educators get involved, the Council suggests a number of ways to advocate for children:
POLITICIANS’ PROMISES TO FAMILIES ABOUT EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION NEED TO BE FULFILLED

Early childhood care and education is now in the political spotlight. The issue has gained traction in recent weeks since at least three candidates for president — Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), Sen. Kirsten Gillebrand (D-NY) and Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA) have raised concerns. On February 19, 2019, Warren introduced the Universal Child and Early Learning Act, which would create a network of government-funded care centers with employees earning pay comparable with public school teachers. The plan would be funded by a proposed tax on the wealthiest U.S. households and it would ensure equity in education, Warren said. “The guarantee is about what each of our children is entitled to. Not just the children of the wealthy, not just the children of the well-connected, but every one of our children is entitled to good child care,” she said.

These words should strike a chord among voters, going by the gubernatorial elections last fall. Newly elected governors in 16 states, ranging from Kansas to Connecticut, and Oregon to Ohio, have promised to establish universal pre-K and invest in the early childhood workforce. In Colorado, Jared Polis pledged to “establish universal pre-kindergarten and preschool in every community across the state within two years.”

In Michigan, Gretchen Whitmer ran on a platform prioritizing “the first 1,000 days of a child’s life.” She proposed phasing in free, voluntary, full-day preschool for all 4-year-olds, expanding eligibility for child care subsidies and raising provider reimbursement rates.

During his campaign, California’s Gavin Newsome vowed to invest $500 million in early education and care because “all children, not just the children of a governor or a filmmaker, should have the good life in California.”

Mayors in some of the nation’s biggest cities also have jumped on the bandwagon by making plans for large public pre-K programs. Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan envisions a universal pre-K program in his city because he said he thinks “the challenge of kindergarten readiness is perhaps nowhere more acute than it is in Detroit.” In Boston, Mayor Martin J. Walsh has pledged to create universal pre-K in his city and made modest progress toward that goal in 2019 by enrolling 3,000 children.

The de Blasio administration in New York says it is undertaking “the largest and most ambitious expansion of pre-K of any city in the nation’s history” and has already reached 70,000 children.

These and other programs face challenges that include crowding and ensuring quality benchmarks. Additional issues include finding enough money to give educators adequate compensation and reaching all eligible children. Now U.S. political leaders must overcome these roadblocks to keep the bold promises they’ve made to give all children good care and education.
» Team up with your colleagues to form your own advocacy group
» Join forces with school boards and other advocacy groups
» Vote in local, state and national elections for candidates who support children and families
» Attend town meetings and ensure that early childhood issues get on the agenda
» Introduce the families you serve to advocacy opportunities
» Start or join letter-writing campaigns to urge all elected officials to support stronger and better child care legislation
» Invite policymakers to visit your programs and plan ahead to maximize the value of the visit
» Start a blog about your work in the field and include photos of children playing and learning
» Express your point of view by writing letters to the editor or op-eds for publication in magazines, journals or newspapers.36

In a much-quoted column, Roosevelt praised the centers for allowing women to be more productive, knowing their children were safe and getting proper care.

“The closing of child care centers throughout the country is certainly bringing to light the fact that these centers were a real need,” Roosevelt wrote. “We have to face the fact that there are married women with young children who have to work. In such cases it would seem to be in the interests of the community to organize child care centers and see that they are properly run.”37

Failure to act would cost us in the long run, Roosevelt cautioned her readers.

“These children are future citizens, and if they are neglected in these early years, it will hurt not only the children themselves but the community as a whole. Many communities can carry the expense of such organization for children’s centers without any state or federal help. But when state help is needed it should be given; and when states are incapable of giving sufficient help, it should be forthcoming as it was in the war years,” she wrote.38

And the passage of time has not tarnished the truth of Roosevelt’s words. If we take her advice, we can improve the state of our union both today and tomorrow. United, we can find the will and the way to end the child care crisis and make our early childhood care and education deserts bloom with new chances for learning and growth. Then all children will get the shot they deserve at a better life, and women will have their day to show just what they can achieve. Now that would really be a reason for us all to stand up together and cheer.

A TIMELY BLAST FROM THE PAST

You can see the power of the written word in an old opinion piece by former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, a fervent advocate for human rights. From 1935 to 1962, Roosevelt wrote a syndicated column titled My Day, and on September 8, 1945, she spoke out for the many working mothers, social workers and early childhood educators who had fought to keep the Lanham preschools open.


6 Ibid.
10 Ho. September 8, 2018.
13 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
19 Ho. 2018
20 Erickson. 2018.
27 Ibid.
Deserting Our Youngest Children

Principles to Professionalize the Early Childhood Workforce

Politicians’ Promises to Families about Early Care and Education Need to Be Fulfilled