Council for Professional Recognition

Child Development Associate® CDA National Credentialing Program

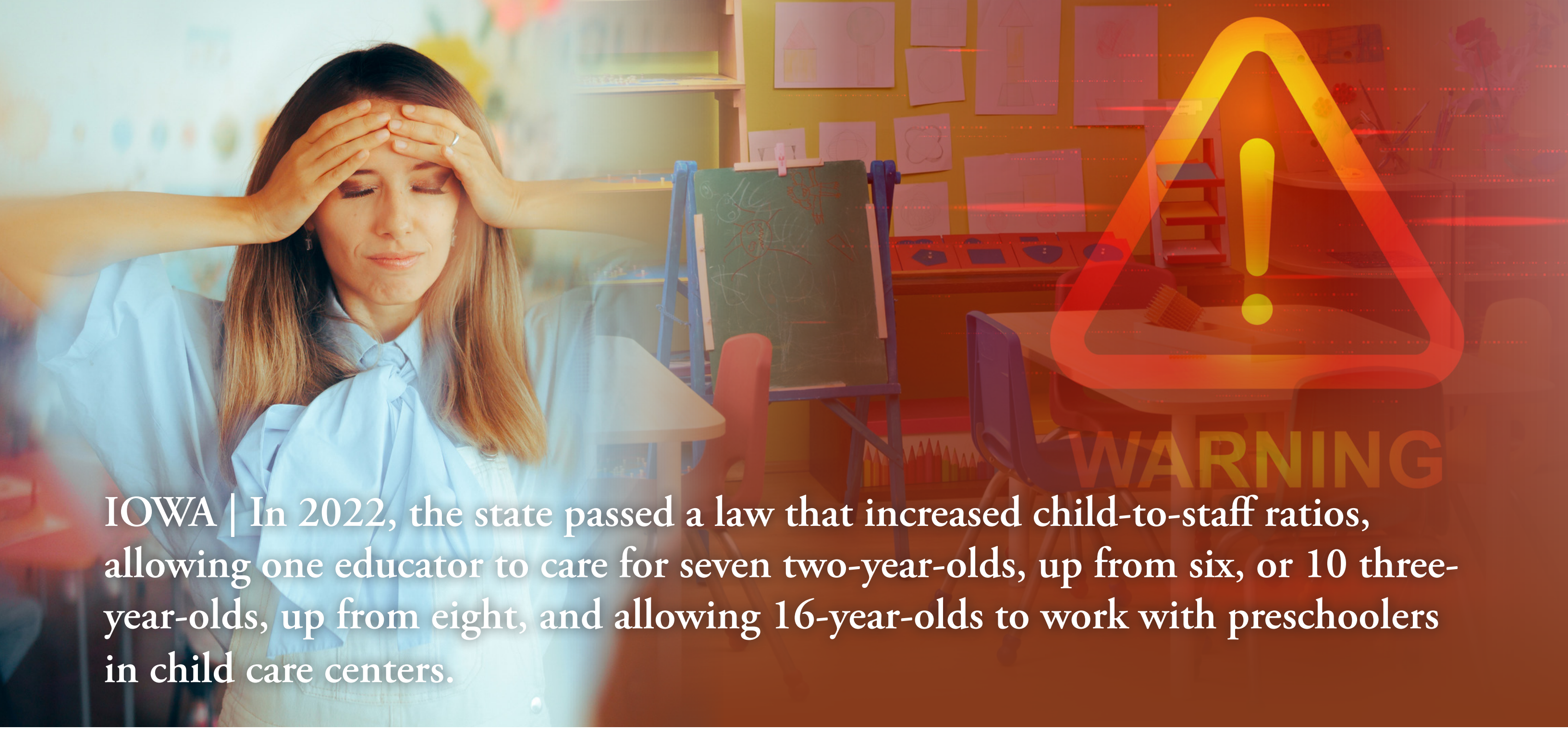
Getting Regulations Right:

Ratios, Staff Requirements and Insurance Rates

Child care regulations should strike a balance that protects children and supports the educators who serve them. A common-sense approach to regulations keeps children safe, healthy and learning while not drowning educators in paperwork and causing them undue stress. But not all regulations meet this sensible standard. “Do you want to understand the difference between child care regulations like ratios that truly impact health, safety and quality versus extraneous regulations that fail any reasonable cost/benefit analysis?” Elliot Haspel, an acclaimed child and family policy expert and commentator, recently posed the question. In an online post, Haspel called attention to the plight of RB Fast, a Denver early childhood teacher who had worked in the field for nearly three decades and opened her own center in 2022. Four years later, she had gained the health department’s approval to open a second location and was ready to serve families when she faced a roadblock that abruptly halted her plans.

“I’m paying $8,500 a month for a perfectly safe building I can’t use because of a set of fire doors at the end of our hallway,” Fast explained. “The doors and frames came as kit, and the frame has a label with information on the fire rating. The fire department says they’ll only approve it if the label is on the door, but we can’t move the label to the door. We have to buy a whole new set of doors that has to be ordered and will take weeks to arrive. In the meanwhile, the city will not issue us a temporary occupancy permit while I wait for new fire doors,” Fast complained. “Of course, I really care about the safety and well-being of the children, but I believe the regulators have become so obsessed with checklist compliance that they’ve lost a sense of humanity and reasonable risk.”

Besides, safety regulations may not be effective if educators don’t know how to comply with them, according to the experience of Kristy Ritz, executive director at the West Virginia Association for Young Children and a former Head Start teacher. “I once had children napping when smoke started to drift up the stairs,” she recalled from her time at Head Start. “There was no alarm or notice and I had to get them out of the building immediately. The assistant teacher was a new substitute who had never practiced a fire drill at my school,” she said. That led Ritz to face the crisis alone, but she had the knowledge and skills to rise to the occasion. “I can’t imagine,” she concluded, “how I would have safely gotten more kids out of that building.”

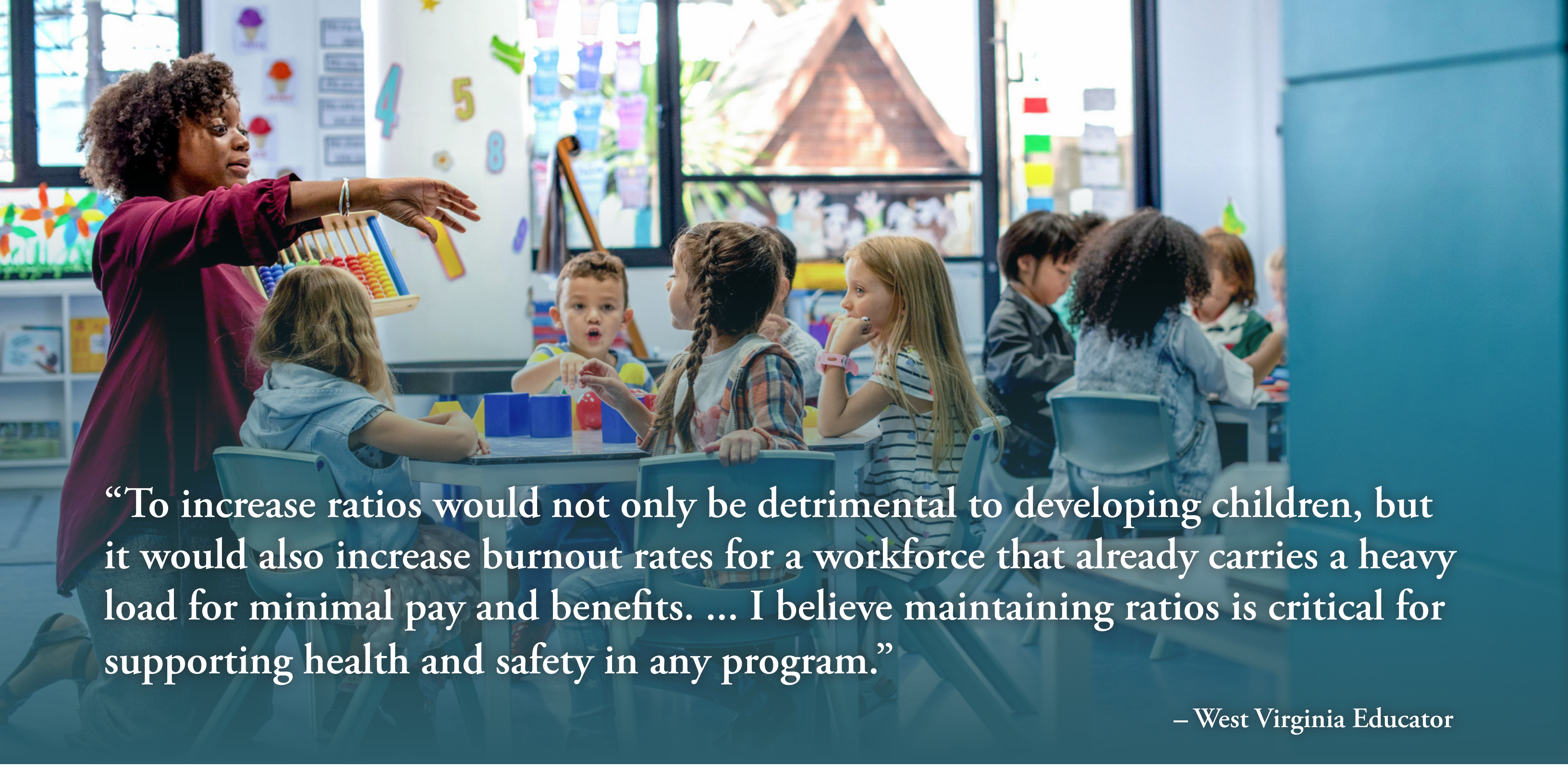


IOWA | In 2022, the state passed a law that increased child-to-staff ratios, allowing one educator to care for seven two-year-olds, up from six, or 10 three-year-olds, up from eight, and allowing 16-year-olds to work with preschoolers in child care centers.

MEASURES THAT RAISE ALARMS

Experienced, competent teachers play a role that doesn't get enough attention in efforts to boost access to early learning and care by deregulating the sector. In many states, the child care shortage has led to a flurry of proposals to loosen requirements for child care programs in two general ways. One is to lower the age at which someone can work in a child care program, like South Dakota did a few years back when it allowed 14-year-olds to serve as assistant teachers. The other is to increase the number of children for which one teacher can care. And both of these measures raise alarms. Common sense dictates that you should question the wisdom of leaving a young, untrained teen responsible for a helpless infant. Increasing the number of children per adult is also a step that demands close consideration before concluding that higher child-to-staff ratios can provide a solution.

The results of these measures were unnerving in Iowa, where lawmakers have pushed for deregulation to end the state's child care shortage. In 2022, the state passed a law that increased child-to-staff ratios, allowing one educator to care for seven two-year-olds, up from six, or 10 three-year-olds, up from eight, and allowing 16-year-olds to work with preschoolers in child care centers. The following year, lawmakers took the law a step further by allowing the teens to care for infants and toddlers alone and without supervision. After the passage of the legislation, at least one documented case noted the caregiver's age as a factor in an abuse complaint. In that instance, a teenager working in a child care program was accused of hitting a child in her care, pulling the child's arm and swearing. An investigation found that the teen told the child's mom, another teacher at the program, that she was "a crackhead" and had no control over her own class, as an official state report observed. The report concluded that "it is in the best interests of the center for the teen to take a break until she is mature enough to work here."



“To increase ratios would not only be detrimental to developing children, but it would also increase burnout rates for a workforce that already carries a heavy load for minimal pay and benefits. ... I believe maintaining ratios is critical for supporting health and safety in any program.”

– West Virginia Educator

THE RISKS OF RAISING RATIOS

Granted, this was an extreme case, but it points to the perils of deregulation. Adopting standards to permit more children per teacher and less prepared teachers won’t provide families with the high-quality, caring services they want. A North Carolina father named Eric Fitts said the relationships teachers had with his children were a major factor in choosing the child care center where his children were enrolled. “There seemed to be a genuine relationship and concern for how their school days were going,” he said. Similarly, Julia Callahan, a Georgia mother of two, described close connections between teachers and her children as a key factor in her child care decision. So, she feared the impact of higher child-to-teacher ratios, especially on her son. “My son is incredibly smart, but he needs one-on-one attention,” she said. “If there are 40 kids in the class, is he ever going to get that? If he’s having an anxious day, would anyone notice?” Callahan worried, and she went on to envision “a room filled with a whole bunch of four year-olds and a lot of tension.” When you see that, she warned, “there’s something wrong.”

Early childhood professionals share Callahan’s sense of concern as more states consider relaxing child-to-teacher ratios. “Children come to us needing more support than ever, and it’s hard to meet their needs when teachers are spread thin and stressed,” a professional development specialist in Montana pointed out. “To increase ratios would not only be detrimental to developing children, but it would also increase burnout rates for a workforce that already carries a heavy load for minimal pay and benefits,” agreed an early educator in Maine. “I believe maintaining ratios is critical for supporting health and safety in any program,” a West Virginia educator insisted. “If ratios cannot be maintained, children cannot be adequately supervised. Also, ratios are important in providing proper social and emotional support for the children. When child-to-teacher ratios are not in compliance, staff can be stressed and unable to effectively perform their roles.”

WHY EDUCATORS STAY

These are valid concerns, according to Linda Smith, who serves as executive director of the Child Care Trust, a catalyst for change in the early learning field. "Working in a child care center is a high stress job. The pay is low. Turnover rates are high. Staffing shortages lead to empty classrooms, which ratchets up demand. Recruiting and retaining qualified educators has always been a challenge," she pointed out. Still, the COVID pandemic made it worse by leading to more children with challenging behaviors and developmental delays. As a result, more educators felt burned out in 2025 than in the year before, according to the latest workforce survey from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Burned-out educators who've left the field have led to fewer slots for families. So, adding to educators' stress through higher ratios is not the way to preserve the profession or boost the supply of teachers.

Instead, the key to building a stable early childhood workforce might be providing the workforce with more education and training, as the Buffett Early Childhood Institute showed in an eight-state study this year. The study found that only 56 percent of the early care and education workforce that was active in 2023 remained active two years later. In contrast, 70 percent of educators with an associate degree in early childhood education remained in the workforce, 63 percent of educators with a general associate degree did and 65 percent of educators with a Child Development Associate® (CDA) Credential™ remained. In short, the data suggested that targeted early childhood education, degrees or credentials may offer a path ahead, as Smith, one of the study's authors, concluded. "We need people trained in early childhood education and child development. When they have that, they tend to stay."

A SURVEY OF CDAs

Smith is an avid fan of the CDA® credential because she's convinced that it prepares people for the demands of the early learning profession. "Child care is hard, physical work," Smith said. "If you're not trained to understand basic child development, how you react to child behaviors varies." On the other hand, "CDA holders know what to do," she pointed out. "They know how to manage children." This is because CDA training incorporates areas—including social and emotional growth, professionalism and relationships with families—that teachers must master to work well with young children, the Children's Equity project at Arizona State University explained in a recent report. Besides, the credential is especially effective in helping educators to meet the demands

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of regulation since the number one goal of the *CDA® Competency Standards* is “to establish and maintain a safe, healthy learning environment.”

Data from the Council for Professional Recognition also bears out the value of the CDA credential. Educators who succeed in earning a CDA gain crucial skills and are more prepared for the classroom, as 79 percent of owners and directors agreed in the Council’s latest survey of CDA credential stakeholders. The top benefits of earning a CDA are increased knowledge of evidence-based practices, specialized knowledge of child development and readiness to manage difficult classroom situations, as child care owners and directors pointed out. CDA holders appear to be better at interacting with children and communicating with parents. They also stay longer on the job and seem more committed to their work due to the effort it takes to earn the credential.

It pays off by helping CDA holders progress in their careers, according to 73 percent of the CDA earners that the Council surveyed. Half of employers pay CDAs up to 10 percent more than their colleagues without credentials. And many CDA holders get promotions, most commonly to the position of lead teacher. Still, CDA holders realize that earning a CDA is about more than pay and promotions. Earning a CDA is a way to expand your skills and serve children better, the reason 60 percent of respondents said they pursued the credential. CDA holders, as the data shows, have a sense of commitment and competence that’s the hallmark of fields the public depends on to keep it healthy and safe.

CRITERIA FOR CRUCIAL PROFESSIONS

Most of these crucial professions have earned the public trust by meeting clear, consistent and right-sized regulations that respect their expertise. Baseline requirements for training, qualifications and a limit to the number of people served are the norm for regulated professions, including doctors, nurses, electricians, architects and airline crew. This means, for example, that when the public faces health care workforce shortages or higher airline costs, policymakers do not pass changes that place hospital patients in the care of teenagers, overpack planes with passengers or reduce training requirements. Even in the event of problems, regulations remain a crucial and accepted part of protecting public safety and ensuring that professional workers aren’t burdened to the point where they endanger the people they serve. The same criteria should apply to early childhood teachers who are responsible for society’s most vulnerable members.

Despite the acknowledged importance of protecting children’s safety and health, many state lawmakers have proposed loosening regulations on child-to-teacher ratios, class sizes and educator competencies in an attempt to bring down costs and boost supply. These types of changes target parts of care that relate to children’s safety and wouldn’t accomplish the goal that policymakers have in mind. Instead, the changes disregard the skills it takes to teach young children and the challenges educators face in doing their job. Sacrificing health, safety and training requirements can have adverse consequences for program quality, increase costs for child care owners

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and worsen the persistent workforce shortage. The theory of looser requirements and the reality don't agree.

MATH THAT DOESN'T ADD UP

Deregulating the child care field by raising ratios and reducing qualifications hurts children and child care owners, though it makes intuitive economic sense at an initial glance. "If you allow programs to care for more children per adult, the per-unit cost of serving children goes down and you don't have to charge each family as much to stay in the black," as Elliot Haspel has pointed out. "Similarly, if you don't require your teachers to have credentials and you can pay them minimum wage it's easier to stay in business and charge parents less"—at least in theory. But the theory doesn't work because short-term steps to cut costs wind up costing child care owners more in the long term, as Haspel goes on to explain.

"When you pay your staff minimum wage and overstuff classrooms with toddlers, do you know what happens? It's loud, chaotic, stressful —and a lot of staff leave," he warned. "Now those programs have to spend money to recruit and onboard new staff while classrooms sit empty." In the meantime, providers lose money since they can't operate a child care center with half their staff. "These are not fast-food establishments that are built to absorb 100 percent turnover in the course of a year." Besides, "even if you accept all the tradeoffs of high ratios and low educator qualifications, you can only save so much money," Haspel explained. "In Mississippi, which has the lowest average cost and lowest percent of family income going to child care in the nation — partially thanks to a $9.44/hour median child care worker wage — parents still pay over $7,000 a year for center-based toddler care. For many families, that math does not work."

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The math doesn't add up either for providers in states that have raised child-to-teacher ratios, thinking it will cause providers' revenues to rise and allow them to pay their staff more. Instead, the hike in ratios has driven up liability insurance costs, which are already pricey for providers. Insurers are aware that allowing more children per teacher increases risks to children's safety, and 49 percent of the programs in NAEYC's January 2024 workforce survey had reported a price hike. For example, "Montana's child care providers are facing an uphill battle to secure, afford and maintain liability insurance for their businesses following changes in state law that have raised child-to-staff ratios," Alex DuBois, director of program services at Zero to Five Montana, explained. "These regulatory adjustments have prompted numerous insurance providers to either substantially hike premiums or outright refuse to cover child care businesses. This has left many providers grappling with uncertainty and financial strain, threatening the stability and sustainability of the child care industry in our state."

Comments like this led NAEYC to launch an additional survey in August 2024 geared solely to the people responsible for making decisions about liability insurance, and the findings were even more alarming. The survey found that about 80 percent of respondents had seen their liability insurance costs go up in the last year, an issue that has ballooned into a crisis for child care centers "The cost is so hard to balance when we're trying to save families money," said a Nebraska family child care owner who had to cut the hours she was available to serve children because her insurance cost too much. A Maryland center director said, "I keep hearing stories of child care centers being dropped from coverage without much notice." And a New York educator called attention to the broader issue underlying the problem: "We need reform of the entire regulatory system so that state regulators work with centers to make them safer. They currently work on a system that is punitive instead of teaching. If regulators worked to improve instead of punishing the field, they would help educators be better at their jobs and not be afraid to come forward with issues."

BLANKETS AND BUREAUCRATIC BURDENS

The complaints and conflicts notwithstanding, everyone wants the same thing—an adequate, affordable child care system—and the components seem apparent. The system needs potential providers who can open and manage programs, trained educators to staff the programs and enough revenue for programs to pay the bills. It also needs regulations that make sense and don't present unneeded barriers to providers. Regulatory reform that streamlines the steps needed to become and stay licensed — while leaving critical health and safety regulations in place — is part of a healthy child care system. It's clear how we can get regulations right. Yet providers in many states face regulations that impose excessive red tape, overlap with other regulations and put pointless bureaucratic burdens on providers.

In Illinois, for example, providers stumble through a maze of complex requirements on their own, leading to delays in opening, as they told the nonprofit media outlet ProPublica last year. They also pointed to regulations that are contradictory or outdated. One directs providers to place a blanket in every crib, for instance, though the state prohibits using blankets to reduce the risk of SIDS. The state also directs providers to carry coins on walks so they can use a pay phone in an emergency, a relic that one child care owner called "ridiculous." Other providers said their applications got stuck in limbo for weeks or months, with little explanation for the delay or news about when they would receive a license. And the state's own data supported this claim: "For more than a third of applicants, the state missed its 90-day timeline to approve applications." In the meantime, families waited for the care they needed for their children.

REDUCING THE RED TAPE

Meeting the need depends on cutting back on the red tape to reduce unneeded burdens that don't protect children, as Iowa did in 2021 after Governor Kim Reynold's Child Care Task Force made a number of recommendations to expand access to child care for working parents. The recommendations included a "red tape review" of all state regulations every five years, with the first review scheduled for completion by the end of 2025. Ryan Page, a child care administrator at the Iowa Department of Health & Human Service, and a member of the task force, oversaw the endeavor and has described the common sense approach that her team took.

"We reviewed each rule related to its purpose," Page recalled. "Was it necessary? Was it clearly understood? We looked for duplicative requirements and transparency. Where definitions or requirements might be located elsewhere, we linked to them rather than repeat the entire text. We identified rules related to compliance with federal law. And we reviewed all rules for simplicity and common sense. For example, if school-age children used the playground during school hours, were monthly child care inspections of the playground really necessary for us to say that the playground can't be used by the licensed child care program at the same location? Rules related to state statutes were identified and, in some cases, clarified. The end result was a complete rewrite of the state's licensed child care center regulations."Reducing bureaucratic roadblocks like Iowa did is a step toward surmounting the hurdles that make providers' lives harder. Providers spend time, effort and resources to meet regulations, and the burden of compliance discourages some from providing care. So, states should identify and reduce requirements that don't closely relate to program safety and quality. States should also consider whether they are demanding an excessive amount of documentation and reports. If so, the states should review reporting requirements to strike a balance between important and cumbersome requirements. That means revising their systems to recognize and trust competent educators who the state doesn't need to micromanage through a mountain of regulations.

EXPANDING CHILD CARE IN THE EMPIRE STATE

The importance of qualified early childhood teachers was an issue that came up this May as New York State leaders considered addressing the child care crisis by opening thousands of child care seats. In December 2025, Governor Kathy Hochul signed legislation ending a provision in a 2000 social services law that has barred the state Office of Children and Family Services from relaxing child care staffing ratios, among the nation's strictest. State Senator James Skoufis, who introduced the bill in 2024, was convinced that adjusting the ratios is "more critical than ever" to scale up the state's child care sector and provide more affordable care to working parents, as he pointed out last month. Assemblymember Andrew Hevesi, who sponsored the bill, saw it as a way to support providers by allowing them to serve more children without increasing their staff or costs. "Child care providers are operating on such slim margins that they frequently worry about going out of business," Hevesi said. "We were looking for a way to give them some breathing room in an incredibly difficult climate without costing anybody any money."

These arguments for the potential change didn't sway child care advocates who fear that having the same number of staff supervise more children would increase the risk of accidents without addressing the root cause of the state's child care crisis: low wages for the workforce. "One thing that makes child care in New York State so high quality is that we have low ratios—and that's certainly not something we want to step away from," Grace Hill, a member of the Empire State Campaign for Child Care, pointed out. "I don't think staffing ratios are the solution to the tremendous issues we have related to supply," she contended. "The key is more investment in the workforce, including higher pay for child care workers."

BOOSTING COMPETENCE AND COMMITMENT

Investing in the child care workforce is a key step toward resolving the child care shortage that's driving deregulation, and that demands more than raising educators' pay. A comprehensive approach to the problem should include intentionally recruiting new educators, boosting professional benefits, increasing job quality, directing resources toward professional growth and giving educators more recognition. Among educators who considered leaving the early learning field, 60 percent said that they would stay in the profession with higher wages, according to the Council's data, and 20 percent said that they would stay if they received more respect. Educators also want

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ways to build their skills and broaden their avenues to advancement, demands that the CDA meets. Council data shows that 73 percent of CDA holders felt the credential would allow them to progress in their careers and 87 percent felt more prepared to center the classroom.

Providing more educators with this sense of competence and commitment could help resolve some of the ongoing issues surrounding regulation, Linda Smith suggested in a recent discussion with the Council. "Right now, we're looking at higher ratios in early childhood classrooms and lower qualifications for the workforce," Smith said. "But when you put someone who just graduated from high school and has no training in a room with eight to ten toddlers, families can't be sure what's going to happen to their children." On the other hand, families can count on trained teachers who know what they're doing with children, Smith explained. "The quality of care a child gets depends on the quality of adult-child interactions," she said. "It's a hard fact I've been repeating for years, and I recently brought it up when talking to a state administrator. If we had more qualified people in our early childhood classrooms, as I told him, we would need fewer regulations." Having educators with the right skills, like those who hold a CDA, could help us get regulations right.

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