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CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

**THE ROLE OF CHILD CARE SMALL BUSINESSES
SUPPORTING PARENTS AND THE AMERICAN WORKFORCE**

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON SMALL BUSINESS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

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Chair Shaheen, Ranking Member Ernst, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for convening today's hearing on the role of child care small businesses in supporting parents and the American workforce.

I am Dr. Laurie Todd Smith and I serve as the Director of the Center for Education Opportunity and the Center for the American Child at America First Policy Institute, a non-profit, non-partisan research institute that exists to advance policies that put American families first. I am a former early childhood teacher, Director, and public school teacher. I have had a long and rewarding career at every level of the education continuum, but I strongly believe that early childhood education is the most crucial area of U.S. policy and so much of my research is focused on early literacy and education opportunity for all children. I am honored to testify before the committee today on this topic, and it is fitting that I am doing so during the National Week of the Young Child. Today in my testimony, I will discuss the research highlighting the importance of quality child care. I will also address the challenges states face, including limited child care capacity, high child care costs, and the need for a well-supported child care workforce. I will conclude by highlighting state successes in these areas.

Introduction

The first five years of a child's life are pivotal for laying the foundation of their future learning and success, as the brain is highly adaptable to experiences during this period. Despite years of federal support for early care and education, existing policies are fragmented and do not consider the latest research, hindering their effectiveness. The environment significantly influences the development of a child's brain, with supportive environments fostering optimal growth and adverse conditions having long-lasting consequences. Disparities in early experiences exist, with children from lower-income backgrounds often entering school underprepared. It is easier and less costly to form strong brain circuits during the early years than to intervene or "fix" them later. However, federal policy has not adapted to the latest research on child care and education, with existing programs often lacking coordination and being based on outdated science. These programs also neglect the intertwined nature of care and education and do not fully address the needs of children who spend significant time in child care. To improve children's outcomes, the focus should be on early health and wellness, strengthening families, and supporting parents as essential drivers of young children's well-being. The home, community environment, and quality of interactions a child experiences directly impact their health and brain development.

State Challenges and Solutions

The child care industry within states is fragmented and typically has varying governing structures that seek to align services but continue to fund programs instead of families. The child care market includes a diverse set of for-profit and nonprofit businesses, including large child care centers run by national or regional companies; child care provided in the owner's home—often referred to as family child care or home-based care; care provided in faith-based settings; and individual caregivers. Some of the challenges that states report are related to a low number of child care centers or home providers, leaving parents with few options, the high costs of child care, and recruiting and retaining qualified child care professionals.



When it comes to early childhood education, states should lead the way. States have faced significant challenges in optimizing federal funds and aligning them with their respective child care plans. The recently introduced [Stronger Workforce for America Act](#) (WIOA reform bill HR6655) includes many improvements that could strengthen the American workforce including childcare. Governors are granted authority to retain a portion of the total funding for various programs, including adult, youth, and dislocated worker initiatives. Governors have the flexibility to allocate funds towards eligible activities that align with their priorities including childcare. Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves leveraged funds from the WIOA governor's reserve fund to establish the state's career coaches program in public schools. This program places coaches within school districts to guide students towards quality career pathways. Coaches can also advise high school students on the training and job opportunities available in the state. Following the program's success in several communities, the state legislature allocated an additional \$8 million and then \$12 million more to expand it to additional school districts (Accelerate Mississippi, n.d.).

The best way to improve child care policy is to identify, support, and highlight the work of innovative states focused on advancing whole families through a two-generation strategy that simultaneously enables adult work and supports young children's learning and development.

Child Care Capacity

One of the most successful ways the early childhood field has seen improvement is through a state systems approach to increase alignment, coherence, and continuity of child care across programs and services (Erdei, 2019). Instead of looking at child care as a separate entity, the systems approach seeks to achieve increased access, reduce duplication of effort, and improve effectiveness across government agencies and between public and private organizations. States have worked to build cohesiveness on financing, governance, training for teachers, Head Start, child care, public pre-k, home visiting, and other sectors of early childhood to operate as a whole. North Carolina created a state position within the [Department of Commerce](#) to focus on child care specifically addressing the insufficient supply of high quality and affordable child care in the state. States like Arkansas, Georgia, and New Mexico have significantly improved the alignment and coordination of services for young children and their families by consolidating state agencies, creating a governing board for early childhood education, and administering federal and state funding for child care and public PreK from within one agency (Smith et al., 2018).

[Family Forward NC](#) is an innovative initiative to improve children's health and well-being and keep North Carolina's businesses competitive. It is employer-led change to increase access to research-based, family-friendly practices that improve workplace productivity, recruitment and retention; grow a strong economy; and support children's healthy development. Resources for parents about child care are included and employers to help address the child care needs of their employees are available for employers.

States clearly recognize that quality child care is crucial for a healthy economy, and many are taking action to create a wider variety of child care options, both publicly and privately funded. These policies include increasing the number of child care providers. A recent example is the [partnership](#) between the Mississippi Department of Human Services and Wonderschool, a child



care platform. This program helps qualified individuals launch new home-based child care programs, specifically targeting areas with child care shortages. For such programs to succeed, data systems must also improve.

In order to better understand child care capacity, states must have accurate data. An Early Childhood Integrated Data System collects, integrates, maintains, stores, and reports information from early childhood programs across multiple agencies within a state that serves children and families from birth to age 8. The importance of integrated data is widely acknowledged, given its ability to facilitate better outcome tracking, increase efficiency, and improve the capacity for informed decision-making, leading some states to put more resources behind creating and developing data systems than others. Mississippi has made considerable progress towards developing and establishing a statewide integrated education and workforce longitudinal data system. The system has a shared vision and mission, sustainable partnerships, and governance and management plans for sharing data amongst state agencies. The system includes longitudinal data on early childhood, K-12 education, community colleges, higher education institutions, employment, rehabilitation services, and corrections. Many education and workforce leaders have recognized the importance and value of such a system as it has been used to generate information to inform policymakers and stakeholders on student achievement and workforce outcomes.

To streamline early childhood services, states like Georgia consolidated departments to form entities like Bright from the Start. This single agency now oversees all early childhood initiatives in the state. In a similar effort, Iowa established a Childcare Task Force through an executive order by Governor Reynolds to tackle childcare shortages and employment obstacles

Child Care Cost

Child care is often the most significant expense for families with young children and more choices are urgently needed. It is not only costly for parents but also costly to provide. High-quality child care is a multi-dimensional concept and may vary based on the setting, such as center-based care or family child care homes. It is critical to respect the role of parents in choosing the care best suited to their child's needs, values, language, culture, and work schedules. One-size-fits-all directives on what constitutes high-quality child care can be counterproductive, especially when few child care providers are left in the market from which to choose. Child care policy and quality rating systems should include all provider types, including home-based family child care, to enable safe, nurturing child care options and settings.

Licensing, regulatory, and monitoring frameworks are the basis for ensuring that child care settings are healthy and safe for children. However, policies to regulate the health and safety of child care are created separately at the federal, state, and local levels. This can result in an overlay of contradictory policies and procedures, the imposition of unnecessary and burdensome requirements, and multiple visits from regulatory officials and program monitors at many levels of government. Some regulatory practices, such as local zoning laws, inadvertently drive up prices and reduce availability and fail to create a more nurturing environment for children. The Federal government and states should ensure that regulatory frameworks, requirements, and monitoring practices are not duplicative and unintentionally drive up the cost of providing care,



reduce availability, or push different types of providers, such as faith-based or home-based family child care providers, out of the market.

Meanwhile, businesses can invest in benefits that directly support their employees' child care needs. Many companies now provide annual [child care stipends](#) to their workers, while others create on-site child care services. The [UPS Child Care Initiative](#), launched in partnership with Patch Caregiving, was piloted in 2022-2023. The program, a first for UPS, aimed to mitigate child care challenges and increase employee retention. It offered on-site day care services, with 80% of eligible employees participating and avoiding over 120 unplanned absences. The initiative significantly reduced employee turnover from 31% to 4%. Given its success, UPS plans to expand the program to more facilities in 2024.

Like UPS, many businesses recognize that paid leave, child care, and other family-friendly policies are important ways to recruit and retain the workforce. The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) excludes the cost paid by employers of providing benefits such as accident and health insurance, retirement benefits, and life insurance from the "regular rate" of pay, and thus the overtime pay calculations. Currently, under [FLSA](#) employers must pay additional overtime for the benefit of on-site child care and child care subsidies. Unlike healthcare or even health club benefits, there is no statutory exclusion for the cost of providing child care benefits. All businesses can benefit from a better understanding their employees' child care needs. Beyond current tax credits, technical assistance around employer-sponsored child care models and best practices, as well as general information about employee-parent child care needs and return on investment from family-friendly policies, could be more widely distributed.

All of these aforementioned initiatives demonstrate a growing focus on improving access to high-quality child care through public and private partnerships to support the early childhood education workforce. These examples also underscore the necessity of state-level engagement to support the long-term viability of early childhood education and child care initiative.

Child Care Workforce

An essential component of high-quality child care, particularly for young children, is ensuring a nurturing, responsive relationship with caregivers. A college degree alone is an uncertain proxy for quality child care. Requiring child care staff in a child care setting (center or home-based) to have a college or other degree can increase costs, unnecessarily burden already low-paid providers with unnecessary student loan debt, and drive others out of the profession. Policies should encourage skills-based hiring to ensure providers bring the competencies and skills needed to provide quality care, irrespective of academic degrees. Making it easier for educators and caregivers to gain the skills and competencies they need to provide high-quality care that promotes healthy development and learning can encourage more providers to enter and stay in the workforce. Removing barriers to access to professional development and creating pathways creating multiple pathways to enter and advance in the field is critical, as is ensuring that compensation aligns with market demands.

Compensation for child care providers, especially those workers who care for infants and toddlers, is generally very low. However, federal and state-level policymakers have increased credentialing and degree requirements over time. Apprenticeship models provide a viable



credentialing option for the early childhood education workforce." Child care apprenticeship models provide experience and are an excellent way to highlight and train individuals considering a career in child care. Ten years ago, only a handful of states had child care Registered Apprenticeship Programs (RAPs). Over the past few years, 35 states have implemented regional or statewide Registered Apprenticeship programs for child care and early learning, with an additional seven states currently developing such programs. These initiatives are relatively new and typically serve a small number of apprentices, ranging from five to 25 individuals.

Summary

In conclusion, improving the well-being of America's young children is crucial to their life chances and the success of our nation overall. The widespread desire for a work-life balance that prioritizes parental involvement is underscored by findings from the [2021 American Compass survey](#). Families seek diverse options, including affordability and flexibility, highlighting the importance of providing various choices to accommodate varying needs. Furthermore, all 50 states have established early learning standards from infancy through preschool, recognizing that children learn continuously in various settings. Therefore, policies that bolster family bonds and empower parents, especially during crucial early developmental stages, merit attention. This approach resonates with parents' preferences and fosters optimal child development, ultimately contributing to a brighter future for America.



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