

Child Care Providers: The Workforce Behind the Workforce in Maine

Investments in child care programs with highly-qualified teaching staff set kids on the path to success



Acknowledgements

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Authors:

Sandra Bishop, Ph.D., Chief Research Officer

Kim Russell, Maine State Director

Contributors:

Tom Garrett, Communications Director

Mariana Galloway, Art Director

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141
fewer licensed
child care providers
since COVID-19

Summary

Quality child care can strengthen the current and future workforce, contribute to a strong economy and public safety, and enhance national security.

Unfortunately, Maine's child care system does not meet the needs of our state's children and families. When families do not have the child care they need, parents' work productivity falls, resulting in costs to parents, their employers, and, ultimately, taxpayers.¹ There are other consequences as well. Maine jails are full of people serving time for serious and costly crimes. It doesn't have to be that way. Providing at-risk children with high-quality early learning opportunities can help reduce the human and fiscal costs of crime in the future, by setting children up for success in school and beyond. Further, our national security relies on qualified young adults who are ready, willing, and able to serve in

the U.S. military. However, educational deficits, health issues, and behavior problems (substance abuse and crime) currently prevent 68 percent of Maine youth from qualifying for service.² Healthy early development sets the stage for children's future success. Without improvements to the child care system, our nation risks having an even smaller recruiting pool in the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated longstanding challenges faced by the child care system. Many Maine child care providers closed temporarily during the pandemic, and 141 providers have closed permanently. Even among the providers that have reopened, many are operating at reduced capacity, due to COVID-related precautions and/or staff shortages. In addition, there has been a 19 percent decline in child care workers, further impairing a sector that cannot meet the



overwhelming demand for its services. As a result of these shortcomings, many parents, especially mothers, have been forced to reduce their work hours or leave the workforce entirely.

As our state responds to the challenges presented by the pandemic, policymakers must continue to grow access to quality child care. A fundamental feature of child care quality is highly-qualified teachers who are well-trained both before and during their service and who need to be adequately compensated. Maine policymakers must address the needs of the child care workforce to ensure that families have the child care they need, parents can return to the workforce, and children can be set on the path to educational success. In particular, Maine's child care workforce solutions must include increased compensation and benefits, scholarships, and apprenticeships, along with other innovative solutions. Action and innovation now can improve the

experiences of Maine children today and strengthen our state in the years to come.

Most Maine Parents are in the Workforce and Need Child Care

In Maine, there are approximately 77,000 children under age 6, and 71 percent of these children have all available parents in the workforce.³ As a result, many very young children are in child care while their parents are working to support their families, making child care settings an important environment for children's development.

Even prior to the pandemic, Maine's child care system did not meet the needs of parents, children, or employers. One quarter (22 percent) of Maine residents lived in a child care desert, an area in which there are more than three times as many children as licensed child care slots.⁴ The number of family child care providers in Maine had dropped 27.5 percent since 2010.⁵

Availability is especially limited for families who live in rural areas, have infants and toddlers, or work evening and night shifts.⁶ Given the supply of child care in Maine, more than 5,000 Maine children did not have access.⁷ This represents a nine-percent need-supply gap, concentrated in rural areas. Child care, particularly for infants and toddlers, is unaffordable for many families. The cost of infant care in a Maine center averages \$14,248 per year, more than public college tuition (\$10,230).⁸

Beyond the negative effects on children and families, problems with child care inflict a huge economic toll. Our 2019 ReadyNation national study of working

parents of children under age 3 found that, when families do not have the child care they need, parents' work productivity falls, resulting in costs to parents, their employers, and, ultimately, taxpayers.⁹ These child care challenges exact an annual cost of \$57 billion in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue. The estimate for Maine is \$180 million per year in losses due to the child care crisis for infants and toddlers alone.¹⁰ As this study focused just on infants and toddlers, it severely underestimated the economic impact of shortcomings in the overall child care system.

COVID-19 has Exacerbated Maine's Child Care Crisis

The effects of the pandemic have transformed the existing child care crisis into a potential catastrophe that impacts working families and businesses in nearly every sector. Two-thirds of Maine child care centers were closed temporarily during the pandemic, as were 40 percent of family child care providers.¹¹ By spring 2021, 95 percent of Maine providers were open. However, about 20 percent reported being at less than 50 percent of enrollment capacity and more than half of centers were at less than 75 percent of capacity, due to COVID-related precautions (social distancing) and/or staff shortages.¹² Maine has also experienced permanent closures, with a loss of 141 licensed child care providers over the course of the pandemic (an eight-percent drop).¹³ Family child care providers have been particularly hard-hit (15-percent drop vs. one percent for centers).

Over the course of the pandemic, the child care sector has lost one in six workers

nationwide, for a total of nearly 167,000 jobs lost.¹⁴ Maine has experienced a 19-percent decrease in the number of child care workers since 2019.¹⁵ This loss will further impair a sector that cannot meet the overwhelming demand for its services. In fact, in a spring 2021 survey, 43 percent of Maine child care providers reported that they could not meet the demand and 58 percent of centers reported being understaffed.¹⁶

Lack of child care drove many parents, especially mothers, from the workforce, as both schools and child care providers closed, and many mothers left work to care for their children. Nationwide, approximately one million mothers left the workforce, compared to half that number of fathers.¹⁷ From February 2020 to April 2021, women lost 55 percent of the 29,200 jobs lost in Maine.¹⁸ In September-October 2021, more than one-third (35 percent) of Maine households with children under age 4 still had their child care arrangements disrupted due to COVID-19.¹⁹ Child care disruptions, in turn, disrupted parents' work, with 20 percent taking paid leave, 13 percent taking unpaid leave, 14 percent cutting their work hours, and 13 percent watching their children while working. A survey of Manufacturers Association of Maine members echoes these findings, with 55 percent of respondents reporting that employees cite child care challenges as the reason for employment changes.²⁰

Returning parents, particularly mothers, to work is key to our state's economic recovery. For our economy to stabilize and thrive, access to affordable, quality child care for working families must be a paramount concern.

Research Shows that High-quality Child Care Supports Children's Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Development

For example, a longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in higher-quality child care were better prepared for school at age 4 compared to children in lower-quality child care. At age 15, they were still performing slightly above their peers and had significantly lower levels of behavior problems.²¹ A follow-up study of 814 of these participants at age 26 found that those from low-income families who spent two or more years in high-quality child care were more likely to graduate from college and had higher salaries, compared to those who had been in lower-quality care.²² However, child care must be high-quality in order to help children develop critical skills needed for success in school and life. Among the most fundamental of these quality features are highly-qualified teachers.

Teachers Are the Foundation of High-quality Early Care and Education

The heart of any early childhood education program is the relationship between the teacher and the children.²³ Research indicates that a well-qualified workforce is an essential, fundamental component of high-quality early care and education (ECE). Highly-qualified teachers engage in warm, nurturing interactions with the children to support their development in all areas. Excellent teachers also provide developmentally-appropriate instruction in key early literacy, math and other academic skills.²⁴ To offer this high-quality experience, early childhood educators must be well-trained, both before they start teaching and once they

are on the job through ongoing professional development.²⁵ Adequate compensation is key to attracting and retaining top talent.²⁶ Retaining teachers is particularly important for young children, since positive, stable relationships support healthy development.

Key Elements of a Highly-qualified Early Care and Education Workforce

Education: The level of education required for ECE teachers has been a matter of long-standing debate. Much research, including a comprehensive review of 48 studies by the Campbell Collaboration, has found that higher teacher education levels have a strong relationship to higher quality in ECE.²⁷ In Maine, based on Maine Roads to Quality provisions, experience and training can be substituted for higher education.²⁸

Professional development: The research around ongoing, in-service training for early education teachers offers more clarity than that on pre-service education.²⁹ Studies show that effective professional development is:

- Classroom-focused: related to what teachers are actually teaching;
- Active: allows for hands-on practice of skills;
- Collaborative: with modelling and/or coaching of skills and feedback provided.

The Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network offers numerous training opportunities, including the option of earning various credentials and moving up the career lattice.³⁰ However, providers face barriers to participating in professional

development, including long work hours and low compensation.³¹ Further, investments in professional development can be lost when teachers leave their jobs, often due to inadequate compensation.³²

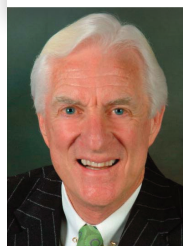
Compensation: Adequate compensation is required to attract and retain a high-quality child care workforce.³³ But child care teachers typically earn substantially less than other teachers. In Maine, the annual mean wage for child care teachers is \$29,770, compared to \$37,780 for pre-K teachers, and \$53,990 for kindergarten teachers.³⁴ Low compensation is a major factor in child care teachers leaving the field.³⁵

The Path Forward for Maine

Maine policymakers must address each of the key elements of child care workforce quality in a comprehensive strategy. This approach is essential because the elements are interrelated; for example, if compensation remains low, teachers will have neither the means nor the incentive to pursue intensive professional development. Similarly, the type and amount of professional development required will vary depending on the level and quality of teacher pre-service education.

The Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) Early Childhood Scholarship Program, administered by the Maine Association for the Education of Young Children, provides one example of a comprehensive approach.³⁶ The program provides scholarships to two- and four-year degree programs in early childhood education. Upon completion, T.E.A.C.H. participants receive a raise or bonus from their employers. Multi-faceted strategies like these represent promising ways of

“Building a world class child care system is a key component of Maine’s 10-year economic strategy and plan.”



Dana Connors

President of the Maine State Chamber of Commerce,
ReadyNation member

building a well-qualified workforce, increasing ECE quality, and ultimately benefiting children, with enhanced experiences and improved learning. Policymakers must continue to invest in these and additional strategies to ensure that all early educators receive the professional compensation and support they need to provide high-quality early learning experiences for all children and parents who want and need it.

The Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN) is working to establish a statewide ECE and out-of-school-time apprenticeship program, building upon the current Child Care Specialist I and II Department of Labor apprenticeship program. The new program will offer an organized apprenticeship system career pathway focused on portability and opportunities for professionals or prospective professionals, including Career and Technical Education



students. Additionally, the Network will align the apprenticeship program with the core competencies of the Child Development Associate (CDA) and the MRTQ PDN Credentials.

Wage supplements are the key means of supporting Maine's child care workforce, increasing workers' income without further burdening parents who already struggle to pay for care. Maine used some of its federal COVID relief funds to supplement child care providers' pay for one year and state legislators have proposed similar programs.³⁷ In addition, relief funds have been used to offer a one-time \$2,000 stipend to newly licensed family child care providers.³⁸

Finally, Maine policymakers must embrace innovation to help solve the child care crisis. For example, Coastal Enterprises has launched a Child Care Business Lab that helps entrepreneurs open child care services in underserved communities.³⁹ A superintendent in Aroostook County proposed having child care teachers and staff classified as school employees, giving them access to professional development and other benefits.⁴⁰ Policymakers should explore these and other promising ideas.

Conclusion

Child care is a powerful means of supporting the development of Maine's children while their parents work. However, this potential will only be fully realized when children can attend quality programs with a highly-qualified child care workforce with adequate education, ongoing professional development, and sufficient compensation. Maine's recent 10-year economic plan highlighted the importance of investments in child care and the child care workforce for economic development.⁴¹ As our state responds to the challenges presented by the pandemic, policymakers must continue to grow access to child care and address the needs of the child care workforce. Support for high-quality child care is an investment in our future public safety, national security, and economic well-being.

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1212 New York Avenue NW / Suite 300 / Washington, DC 20005 / 202.464.7005

