

It's Time for the Child-Centered Child Care System that Utah Families Deserve

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Written by: Anna Thomas



For too many years, child care policy – in Utah and nationally – has been shaped primarily by economic and political forces. These forces have shaped our perceptions of early care and education: “People need childcare because they should be working. Government shouldn’t invest in childcare because that’s a family problem.”

But economics and politics don’t belong at the center of a well-functioning, family-oriented early care and education system.

Children do.

A child-centered child care system would look very different from the one we

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have in Utah today. A child-centered early care and education system would be driven by committed and caring providers who are appropriately compensated, and thoughtfully trained, for their invaluable work. It would offer plenty of choice for Utah families seeking a child care setting that complements their values, preferences and cultural backgrounds. Most importantly, such a system would take seriously the intense developmental needs of young children – and enthusiastically work to fulfill those needs for every child, regardless of their family's monthly income.

This period of great disruption, despite all its challenges and uncertainty, is the perfect moment to reimagine Utah's child care system. It is well past time for our state to invest in a system that celebrates and acknowledges the critical public good that is early care and education.

In an excellent brief entitled [“Complex Considerations for the Recovery of Ohio's Essential Child Care System,”](#) our colleagues at Groundwork Ohio wrote:

“While it is undisputed that quality child care is essential to reopening the economy so parents can return to work, high quality child care also provides the same critical education to our infants, toddlers and preschoolers year round that our K-12 system provides to our school-age children during the school year – especially when infant and toddler brains are growing more rapidly than any other period of their life.

Similarly, as has been learned during this time, the K-12 system effectively provides child care in addition to a high-quality education when children are at school. Our youngest children will soon be part of the workforce themselves on the other side of this pandemic and deserve access to the opportunities we know will support their healthy development and school readiness, so they too can thrive in our future economy.”

You've probably heard that in Utah (as in many other states) a year of [child care for an infant can cost a family as much as a year at a public university](#) for a teenager. Well, there's no reason that shouldn't be true: early education is the better lifelong investment, both for families and for the government. If Utah families had to pay the true value of early care and education, almost none would be able to afford it.

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The COVID19 pandemic has emphasized how integral both [child care](#) and [public education](#) are to the healthy functioning of our communities. The pandemic has also laid bare the dire long-term consequences of Utah's underinvestment in both of these areas.

When the legislature makes its flurry of short-sighted budget cuts this summer, our state child care system will escape with less damage than our (pre)K-12 public education system. That's only because the state has consistently spent on child care programs only the bare minimum necessary to draw down federal funding. There simply isn't any meaningful state funding to cut from Utah's child care programs.

Rather than matching federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and Head Start funding with any state dollars, Utah has been content to settle for whatever we can manage with what Congress decides to give us. The result has been [a child care system that has only one-third the necessary capacity to meet the needs of Utah's working families](#).

Again, that was the capacity of our *pre-pandemic* child care system. Currently, only about 86% of those pre-pandemic child care slots are available to Utah families - and without emergency funding through the CARES Act, that figure would be closer to 60%.

During the pandemic, as before, Utah will probably be able to keep our struggling child care sector afloat by relying on federal funding - for the next few months, at least. But "staying afloat" won't get us any closer to the child-centered child care system Utah families deserve: a stable, diverse system that always puts kids' needs first. Only increased investment by the state government, with substantial support from the corporate sector, can ensure that infants, toddlers and pre-school aged Utah children get the early care and education they deserve.