

Let's Just Say It: Child Care is School, and School is Child Care.

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Written by: Anna Thomas



For years, advocates (like me) have avoided mentioning the fact – at least, in the presence of legislators – that Utah families rely on school not just for education, but also for reliable and high quality child care.

Similarly, until very recently, many Utah policymakers were ignorant of the fact that child care – especially for infants, toddlers and pre-school aged children – is possibly the most critical education Utah families will ever invest in.

[COVID-19 has made all this denial of reality much more difficult.](#)

Right now, education administrators throughout the state are wondering how they could manage to implement a “staggered schedule” in their schools, when doing so would mean that teachers with school-aged children would require paid child care for half the workweek.

Parents working from home are realizing how much personal attention and educational interaction their children are able to receive in child care settings while they are working. Perhaps initially thrilled to save money on child care expenses, they are gaining renewed (perhaps desperate) appreciation for the intense, valuable

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work performed by their child care providers.

Families throughout the state are struggling with a diminished roster of summer camps, summer programs and summers schools. They are wondering how they are going to manage the cost of additional hours of child care that may be necessary in the fall, depending on how individual school districts choose to “re-open” their schools.

Utah families and educators are all re-learning, under great pandemic-driven duress, something that has been the truth for decades: school is child care, and child care is school.

In Utah, about 47% of all kids under age six, who are living with both parents, have both of those parents in the workforce.* Among kids between 6 and 17, who are living with both parents, that number jumps to 57%.* That increase represents a lot of Utah parents, going back to work, as soon as their young kids are able to attend kindergarten.

More than 54,000 children under the age of six live with only one parent.* For 83% of those young children, the single parent they live with is in the workforce.* Among kids between 6 and 17, who are living with only one parent, that number jumps to 98%.* Again, that increase represents a lot of Utah parents, going back to work, as soon as their young kids are able to head off to public school.

The vast majority of Utah parents appreciate that for six or seven hours a day, five days a week, for around 36 weeks out of the year, they are able to put their children in the care of trained professionals, in a relatively safe environment, at little or no cost to their family.

Their children are being educated in all manner of subjects, and they are learning to socialize with other children from different families and backgrounds. They also are under the watchful eye of educators acting “in loco parentis,” a common law principle that empowers educators to take on some of the functions and responsibilities of a parent during school hours and activities.

This all-encompassing educational and social experience is provided to Utah families largely for free – by law – because primary education is regarded generally as a

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public good. Ensuring that all people receive a basic level of education, regardless of their ability to pay for it otherwise, is good for all of us. Public education advances important goals like equal opportunity, work force preparation and an educated populace.

Most Utah parents feel comfortable reading, writing, doing basic math, socializing with other people, finding (some) foreign countries on a map, and playing sports. But, as the pandemic lockdown has reminded so many, not all Utah parents feel qualified to be primarily responsible for teaching their children how to do all those things. No wonder fewer than 5% of school-aged children in Utah are homeschooled.**

It just so happens that public education also provides hundreds of hours of free, high-quality child care to Utah families while accomplishing those important societal goals. School is many things, and yes, it is also child care.

The more we learn about the incredible amount of brain development that occurs in early childhood, the stranger it seems that we, as a society, are still unwilling to acknowledge the reverse: child care is many things, and yes, it is also school.

Many Utah policymakers and elected officials [still insist that “child care is a family issue” that should be left up to families to figure out](#). Families with young children are expected to either care for their children all day, or find someone else to do it for them. Under this model, all the inconvenience, confusion and cost associated with child care fall on individual families.

But our demographics show that this approach is painfully outdated.

Nearly 54% of all Utah children under age six live in a household with all available parents working. The parents of those children are not in a position to fulfill all the responsibilities of teaching, socializing, reading and playing with their children. Those families need the support of child care professionals who, in addition to providing a safe and caring environment for children while their parents are working, are also teaching, socializing, reading and playing with those children.

Unlike public school, however, there is an enormous cost associated with this invaluable service. Subsidies are only available to those Utah families making the

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least amount of money, while almost all Utah families (of any income level) struggle to afford the cost of child care for infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children.

Most families can't homeschool their school-aged children, because they work outside the home (or inside the home for many due to COVID19). Most families also can't pay for private school, because they don't make enough money from their work outside the home. Luckily, public school is available for all those families.

Most families can't stay home to care for and teach their infant, toddler and pre-school aged children, because they work outside the home. Yet, we still expect them to pay for child care, even when they don't make enough money from their work outside the home to afford the early care and education their children deserve.

We need to stop tip-toeing around the fact that Utah families rely on school not just for education, but for safe and highly-effective child care. We need to embrace it. At the same time, we need to embrace the reverse truth: that safe, high-quality childcare is also the equivalent of "school" for young children.

Safe, effective, high-quality care and education for Utah children of all ages is a public good. Treating child care and public education as part of the same important system of learning and development will create enormous benefit for these children, and, by extension, the rest of the state.

** Figures from the 2018 American Community Survey, accessed at data.census.gov*

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*** Calculated from data made available by the Utah State Board of Education on homeschooled children and public school enrollment in the 2015-16 school year (the most recent data reported on the USBE website at <https://www.schools.utah.gov/data/reports?mid=1424&tid=4>).*

Special thanks to Erin Jemison, formerly of YWCA Utah and now with [Community Resources for Justice's Crime & Justice Institute](#), for contributions to this post.