

National Association of State Boards of Education

➔ Supporting Child Care Providers amid COVID-19

By Winona Hao

By April 15, 20 states had ordered child care centers to close in the wake of COVID-19, with exceptions for programs serving the children of essential workers such as health care professionals.¹ Other states modified regulations, with some reducing class sizes to 10 or fewer.² Especially for struggling providers, the emergency presents real financial hardship. Without support, many may never open their doors again.

Although only a few state boards of education directly oversee the program standards and teacher licensure and credentialing for child care programs, they can advocate for support of child care providers during this difficult time. The youngest children, from birth to age 8, will continue to need high-quality early care and education after the pandemic subsides, so they will need schools to which they can return. Serving as the hub for state education policy discussion, state boards can convene stakeholders from across the many agencies and groups that serve young children to determine how best to ensure their uninterrupted learning and support.

A recent survey of over 6,000 child care providers (center and home-based providers) from all 50 states and D.C. found that only 11 percent of providers felt confident that they could survive a closure of an indeterminate length without support. Thirty percent of providers responded that they could not survive a closure of over two weeks without significant public investment, and 49 percent reported losing income due to the inability of families to continue paying for care.³

A similar survey conducted in Louisiana found a staggering 35 percent of Louisiana

child care centers will not reopen after restrictions are lifted. Nearly 80 percent of providers have experienced a loss in revenue, totaling almost \$1.7 million.⁴ According to the Louisiana Department of Education, 60 percent of child care providers had closed their facilities by the end of the March.

FEDERAL AND STATE ACTION

The passage of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act provided some help to child care centers, with these key components:

- \$3.5 billion to states through the Child Care and Development Block Grant Program for immediate assistance to child care providers. States can use this funding to pay providers and to ensure sites can remain open or reopen as appropriate; provide child care assistance, without regard to income, to health care sector employees, emergency responders, sanitation workers, and others deemed essential during the response to the coronavirus; and provide funding to providers who were not participating in the subsidy before for the purposes of cleaning, sanitation, and other activities necessary to maintain or resume operations;
- \$750 million for grants to all Head Start programs; and
- nonprofit and for-profit child care providers with fewer than 500 employees will be eligible to apply for small-business loans to cover payroll, mortgage, rent, and utilities.

Child care is a \$99 billion industry. Thus \$3.5 billion will not address the needs of child care providers and families during this crisis. Many advocates estimate that up to \$50 billion will be needed to fully support providers who are currently closed as well as providers doing the hazardous work of providing care to children of essential workers.⁵

A few states took strong actions to protect child care providers. Vermont promised a massive bailout to its providers to help stabilize the sector during the pandemic.⁶ Its Department for Children and Families issued guidance to assure child care facilities that the state will cover the tuition that families would have paid if they hadn't shut their doors.

Governor Gavin Newsom signed a bill to allow California's child care providers, including family child care homes, to keep receiving state subsidies if they have to shut down business due to the pandemic.⁷ California ECE advocates are urging Governor Newsom to provide more emergency funding to allow providers to offer paid sick leave to staff and purchase supplies to sanitize their facilities.

North Carolina's Department of Health and Human Services guaranteed child care teachers bonus pay of \$300 per month during April and May.⁸ Through its Department of Children and Families, Wisconsin is considering a Hazard Pay Grant Program to "make monthly grants available to certified child care providers, licensed or provisionally licensed child care centers, and child care providers contracted by or established by a school board for providing hazard pay to employees who work during the public health emergency."⁹

New Mexico will pay the cost of health insurance premiums so that uninsured child care workers who test positive for COVID-19 (and are not eligible for other coverage) will be allowed to enroll in the New Mexico Medical Insurance Pool and receive comprehensive health care coverage until they recover.¹⁰

SERVING FIRST RESPONDERS

About 4.6 million health care workers, or 3 percent of the U.S. workforce, have children too young to be left home alone as schools and child care programs close.¹¹ State policymakers have established emergency programs for first responders. Governor Charlie Baker issued an executive order on procedures to approve emergency child care pro-

grams in Massachusetts.¹² Governor Jared Polis ensured that Colorado will provide emergency child care to frontline doctors, nurses, police, and firefighters.¹³ Minnesota has classified grocery clerks as emergency personnel, meaning that they qualify for child care while schools are closed.

Child care expert Samuel J. Meisels argues that the decision to keep certain child care programs open during the coronavirus pandemic is problematic and dangerous because children under 5 will not be able to maintain social distance or wash their hands effectively.¹⁴ He advocates better criteria for access to emergency child care and says that in some cases K-12 schools are better suited to meet the needs of many first responders due to their locations and community connections.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

State and federal governments have roles to play to ensure that child care providers can reopen after the crisis passes. Without high-quality child care, families will not be able to return to work, and young children will miss out on critical opportunities for learning and development.

At the federal level, more funding is needed to support child care providers. Early childhood education advocates wrote Congress April 8 asking for more funding for the Paycheck Protection Program and the Child Care Development Block Grant. They asked that Congress ensure that “small businesses serving ‘essential workers’ as defined in the CARES Act receive categorical priority during the application/approval process and are fast tracked.” The group also advocated for another round of funding under the Small Business Emergency Relief Program, and they want to work with Congress on a package to comprehensively address the needs of the child care industry through the crisis and into recovery.¹⁵

At the state level, states can follow the lead of states that are supporting child care providers by adopting rules on emergency child care, flexible program standards, and financial support and health care.

Child Care for Essential Workers. While emergency rules need to be flexible and

simplified, certain requirements need to stay, such as staff background checks. Other requirements, such as program standards or teacher training, can be flexible or waived to ensure timely service for those in dire need.¹⁶ If states can find existing providers able to serve families in need, states should prioritize the review and approval process for their applications to provide emergency child care. State policymakers should explore ways to monitor the health and well-being of young children in these centers in real time, and there should be backup plans in case of an outbreak in schools.

Child Care Educators as Essential Workers. Child care educators have shown themselves to be the country’s backbone. Many stepped up to provide care and education to young children and families during the crisis, and they should be treated as essential workers. State policymakers should see to their safety and well-being. Child care educators have been underpaid and undervalued for a long time, so states will need to act quickly to recognize their contributions in this crisis with financial support and benefits.

REOPENING CHILD CARE

State decisions are crucial to child care providers. Without proper planning and preparation, providers will close their schools for good. Questions around finance, social distancing, sanitizing, educator health and well-being, food, hazard pay, how best to serve disadvantaged children, and the social and emotional well-being of children must all be weighed. Detailed plans should be communicated across the many agencies that are involved in the early care and education system.

Winona Hao is NASBE’s director of early learning.

NOTES

1 Alabama, California, Hawaii, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming. Rhode Island closed all child care centers until further notice.

2 ChildCare Aware of America, “State by State Resources,” web page, <https://www.childcareaware.org/resources/map/>.

3 National Association for the Education of Young Children,

“Child Care in Crisis: Understanding the Effects of the Coronavirus Pandemic,” March 17, 2020, https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/effects_of_coronavirus_on_child_care.final.pdf.

4 Louisiana Policy Institute for Children, “The Impact of COVID-19 on Louisiana Child Care Providers: Statewide Survey Findings from March 16–March 23, 2020,” https://0cd902dd-9de1-4dae-8781-4a355ebda8df.filesusr.com/ugd/43cca3_880fa5ef99ff49e19dc0948a29f1ae3e.pdf.

5 Anna North, “‘We Are on Our Own’: How the Coronavirus Pandemic Is Hurting Child Care Workers,” *Vox* (April 6, 2020).

6 Lola Duffort, “To Save Child Care Sector during Crisis, Vermont Promises to Cover Tuition,” *VTDigger* (March 27, 2020).

7 Zaidee Stavely, “California Child Care Providers Call for Emergency Support amid Coronavirus Pandemic,” *EdSource* (March 18, 2020).

8 North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Child Development and Early Education, COVID-19 Emergency Child Care Operations and Financing Guidance, March 25, 2020, https://ncchildcare.ncdhhs.gov/Portals/0/documents/pdf/N/NC_Emergency_Child_Care_Operations_Guidelines_Application_Form_03252020.pdf?ver=2020-03-25-203439-153.

9 Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau, Letter from Bob Lang, director, to Senators Fitzgerald and Shilling, Representatives Vos and Hintz, Summary of Provisions of LRB 5904/1 and LRB 5920/P2, March 24, 2020, https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lfb/misc/109_summary_of_provisions_of_lrb_5904_1_and_lrb_5920_p2_3_24_20.pdf.

10 New Mexico Children, Youth, and Families Department, “Governor Orders Agencies to Develop Child Care Plan for First Responders, Key Personnel; Encourages Medicaid Enrollment,” press release, March 18, 2020.

11 Cristina Novoa and Steven Jessen-Howard, “The U.S. Coronavirus Response Must Meet Health Workers’ Child Care Needs” (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, March 24, 2020).

12 Massachusetts Governor’s Office, “Baker-Polito Administration Makes New Announcements on Childcare, Small Business Tax Relief, and Unemployment Insurance Legislation Related to COVID-19,” press release, March 18, 2020.

13 Melanie Asmar, “Colorado Governor Announces Emergency Child Care for Frontline Coronavirus Workers,” *Chalkbeat Colorado* (March 18, 2020).

14 Valerie Strauss, “Early-Childhood Expert: Why Child-Care Centers Should Be Closed during the Coronavirus Crisis,” Answer Sheet column, *Washington Post* (March 24, 2020).

15 First Five Years Fund, letter to leaders of the U.S. House of Representatives, April 8, 2020, <https://www.ffyf.org/ffyf-national-organizations-call-for-additional-covid-19-relief-for-child-care-industry/>.

16 Hunt Institute, “COVID-19 Policy Considerations: Supporting Child Care during the Crisis,” April 2, 2020.

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