



**Testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee
on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
“Solving the Child Care Crisis: Meeting the Needs of
Working Families and Child Care Workers”**

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Good morning, I'm Carrie Lukas, President of Independent Women's Forum. Independent Women's Forum is a nonprofit organization (501c3) dedicated to developing and advancing policies that aren't just well-intended, but actually enhance people's freedom, opportunities, and well-being.

I'm also the mother of five children between the ages of 8 and 17. I've been a stay-at-home mom without paid child care, and I've also used a variety of different paid childcare arrangements. As you consider policies designed to help parents of young children, I urge you to keep the following principles in mind:

**American Families Want Choices, Not a One-Size-Fits-All Government
Daycare Regime**

The premise of today's hearing is that there is a childcare “crisis” making sweeping government intervention necessary. Yet the reality is different: many parents face significant challenges related to accessing and affording child care, but many are also satisfied with their existing arrangements. In fact, a 2021 **Bipartisan Public Policy Center survey** found that two-thirds (66%) of families with a single parent or two working parents say they were using their ideal childcare arrangement in January 2020. That's important because policymakers should seek to help those who need it, but also not disrupt arrangements that are working for parents.



Critically, surveys also suggest that most parents do not prefer formal daycare settings. A 2022 report by the **Bipartisan Policy Center** and Morning Consult found that nearly six in ten parents preferred informal child care over formal child care centers, *even if formal care was free and in a convenient location*. Most parents and Americans simply think that having family or family-like care is best for children.¹

This should caution against imposing proposals like the Child Care for Working Families Act which would heavily incentivize the use of institutional day care—parents' least preferred option.

Don't Make Child Care and Preschools Operate Like K-12 Public Schools

Our recent experience with COVID demonstrated why we should reject any public policy change that would make our childcare and preschool systems function more like our K-12 public schools.

I have five children in public schools and, like many working parents, during the COVID pandemic, that meant I had to juggle my job along with managing my kids' schooling online. Where I live, most private schools provided in-person service by the fall of 2020, but our public schools fought to stay closed for as long as was politically possible, until mid-April 2021. That was long after it made any sense from a COVID and health perspective; long after teachers had been given priority access to vaccines; and long after it was obvious that it was an utter catastrophe in terms of emotional health and lost learning for students—particularly for children from low-income families, those with disabilities, and those for whom English is a second language.

¹ See Linda Smith, Sarah Tracey, Ben Wolters, "Are Parents' Child Care Preferences Changing? Overview of BPC's Parent Survey," *Bipartisan Policy Center*, 2021. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/are-parents-child-care-preferences-changing-overview-of-bpcs-parent-survey/>. And Nikki Graf, "Most Americans say children are better off with a parent at home," *Pew Research Center*, 2016. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/10/10/most-americans-say-children-are-better-off-with-a-parent-at-home/#:~:text=Among%20those%20who%20think%20children,t%20employed%20outside%20the%20home>.



The failures of our K-12 public schools contrast with the childcare sector. At the height of the pandemic, according to the Department of **Health and Human Services**, about 60% of childcare centers closed and enrollment fell by about 70%. But many stayed open to serve the children of critical workers. And by the end of 2020, an estimated **73%** of daycare, preschool, and childcare programs had opened.

In contrast, **at the end of 2020**, only about a third of K-12 public schools were providing fully in-person services. Public schools behaved this way because they do not see parents and students as their customers. Why would they? Their ability to pay the bills and keep their jobs depends on pleasing government officials, not serving families. They know that most families are captive consumers; escaping to another school is financially out of reach. Parents should fight to keep this from becoming the situation for our child care and preschool.

In fact, all of the battles we see raging about public K-12 schools—over the content of the curriculum, the use of pronouns and sex ed, how religion is discussed, and masking policies—will come to your local day care and preschool if the government becomes their primary funder and sets the rules for what constitutes an approved daycare provider. We should also expect union-driven disruptions similar to those parents have endured during K-12 teacher strikes and COVID-era school closures.

Head Start shows just some of the problems you can expect with federal management of child care. Head Start programs provide **fewer hours** at a higher cost than other daycare programs. They also have been found to be ripe with **fraud and abuse**, and even have had **significant safety lapses**. The 3- and 4-year-olds in Head Start facilities were forced to wear masks long after mandates were lifted for adult-dominated spaces; long after they'd been safely removed from other schools; and long after the evidence showed that disposable masks not only didn't help prevent the spread of COVID but probably hurt kids speech and emotional development. Why were Head Start kids specifically targeted for these masking policies? Because they are at the



mercy of regulators who could use them to virtue signal. This is simply wrong and Americans should reject putting more children under this federal regime.

Reduce Regulations to Increase the Quantity of Daycare Providers and Diversity of Daycare Providers

There are ways that government officials can make day care more affordable and accessible. To start, policymakers at all levels of government should seek to eliminate regulations that are not directly related to safety and true quality so that a greater diversity of providers—especially smaller and at-home providers—enter the marketplace so parents have more and better options.

A **study** by the Mercatus Center found that costs of care could be reduced by between \$850 and \$1,890 per child per year by eliminating regulations not related to the quality of care. A **review of childcare regulations** around the country reveals ludicrous examples of regulations dictating the minutiae of daycare facilities such as very specific art supplies and the number and size of balls and other toys, which clearly just create headaches and drive up costs for providers. These should be rescinded.

During COVID, policy leaders around the country, including Democrats as well as Republicans, lifted daycare regulations to encourage the creation of additional daycare options. Policymakers should explore the consequences of this deregulation and make permanent the elimination of regulations that have been found unnecessary.

In fact, in spite of the tremendous disruption during COVID, the 2022 **data** released by Child Care Aware of America showed that the number of licensed childcare centers today exceeded the number open pre-pandemic. States around the country have been enacting a variety of new childcare-related initiatives, which will provide helpful examples of what works and what doesn't.² That's progress that we should seek to continue and the federal government shouldn't disrupt.

² Dana Goldstein, "With Child Care Scarce, States Try to Fix 'a Broken Market,'" *New York Times*, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/18/us/child-care-state-regulations.html>.



Financially Support Families, Not Daycare Providers—and Use Money Wisely

Policymakers considering investing tens of billions more taxpayer dollars in our childcare sector should first do some serious oversight of how existing funding for that sector is being used. Again, our experience during COVID is alarming in terms of reckless spending and zero accountability for the use of taxpayer money.

All of this government overspending and waste has had real consequences, helping fuel the runaway inflation which is making it harder and harder for American families to get by. Rather than shoveling more money into a government bureaucracy, policymakers ought to provide tax relief for parents, especially parents who have young children, since they often face the largest expenses.

Importantly, policymakers should not make financial support conditional on childcare arrangements. Incentivizing the use of paid child care isn't fair to all the families with loved ones—parents, grandparents, aunts, and neighbors—who provide loving care for children in their lives for free, while forgoing paid employment. Having family members like grandparents as caregivers is good for kids and for the grandparents themselves. We should not effectively discourage or crowd out these relationships.

Government-Approved Day Care Isn't Necessarily Good for Kids

Government funding for child care is often sold as a surefire way to improve life outcomes for children, particularly from low-income families. However, the evidence simply doesn't bear this out. **Congressionally-mandated studies** of Head Start have failed to show lasting benefits for participants. A **recent study** in Tennessee of state-run pre-K revealed it has **long-term negative effects** on children's achievement and behavior.



This doesn't mean that no study will ever find benefits associated with preschool, nor does it mean that day care and child care aren't a necessary and important service for millions of children and families. But it should encourage some humility and caution policymakers away from trying to push all children into government-approved childcare centers since it could do more harm than good.

Thank you.

Additional Background Information

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