

[Commentary](#)

Now is the time to fix child care

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Getty Images.

As someone who served in the Minnesota House and now works for Ramsey County, I have seen firsthand the impact that our state's lack of investment in early care and learning has had in our communities.

Families across the state are struggling to access and afford high-quality child care.

Businesses are struggling to attract and retain employees due to a lack of child care slots.

And providers are struggling to make ends meet due to low wages.

Ensuring that families with young children have access to quality, affordable early care and learning opportunities is the best way that leaders can support our workforce, grow our local and state economies, and improve the educational and health outcomes of children in communities across Minnesota.

The Center for American Progress [estimates](#) child care costs in Minnesota are the sixth-highest in the country, with 2021 average market rates for infant care at a center clocking in at \$16,164. At this rate, a family making the median state income of \$71,000 would spend more than 20% of their income on child care – 13% more than national guidelines suggest for financial stability. This is unacceptable, and often forces families to make impossible choices between paying rent, putting food on table, and paying for the child care that allows them to work in the first place.

In 2016, data from the National Survey of Children's Health [indicated](#) that more than 30,000 Minnesota parents of children under age five had to "quit a job, not take a job or greatly change a job because of problems with child care." This negatively impacts not only individual families but also employers and our economy.

In a Minnesota Chamber of Commerce poll, 62% of member businesses ranked affordable child care as a barrier to finding workers. A recent [report](#) by ReadyNation – a coalition of business leaders – showed that insufficient care for children under the age of three depletes the country of \$122 billion each year in lost earnings,

productivity and tax revenue.

Even as early care and learning programming are often unaffordable for families, many of the professionals providing this care earn extremely low wages.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Minnesota's median annual wages for child care workers [are at the same level](#) of jobs that require less formal training with more benefits. Most brain development happens between birth and age three — these professionals are literally helping build children's brains, and they should be compensated fairly for this important work.

For years, state leaders have talked about the importance of early care and learning without making the financial investments needed to produce real transformational change. They have an opportunity to do so this legislative session, by supporting a proposal that early care and learning advocates have put together based on the recently released Great Start Task Force recommendations.

This proposal would cap family contributions at 7% of income; increase reimbursement rates; and expand program eligibility for the child care assistance program; streamline authorizations for families; expand eligibility for early learning scholarships and increase scholarship amounts; provide retention payments for early care and learning professionals; modify Parent Aware (Minnesota's Quality Rating and Improvement System) requirements; and provide funding for technology updates — among other changes that would improve our early care and learning system for children, families, and providers.

With a large surplus, now is the time for leaders to step up and invest in a system that makes child care and early learning affordable for families, ensures children have access to the quality programs they need, and fairly compensates the dedicated people doing this important work. Our communities need bold investment — and we cannot wait any longer.

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