



Bridging Gaps

**Implementing Public-Private
Partnerships to Strengthen
Early Education**

Sarah Taylor Vanover, EdD



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my colleagues Mike Hammons, Lauren Hogan, and Mandy Marler, who have shown me by example how to be a dedicated and outspoken advocate for young children.







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Introduction

This book follows up on my first book, *America's Child-Care Crisis: Rethinking an Essential Business* (2021), which outlines the challenges that child-care programs, early education professionals, and the families they serve are facing. In this book, I offer a deeper exploration of a possible solution to the current crisis: a mixed-delivery care model to early childhood education. To better understand how mixed-delivery care works, we first need to have a good understanding of how three main models of preschool are structured (the next three chapters in this book) and their limitations. The remainder of the book defines mixed delivery in depth, analyzes how it is already being used in parts of the country, and determines what the steps for implementation would be to move forward. Once policy makers and administrators understand how each separate system works, it is important to show how each system can improve by sharing their best features with one another to increase family choice and financially stabilize the early education system.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

Chapter 1 explains the current child-care crisis in the United States and outlines the steps in a call to action. Chapters 2 through 4 explain the problems with the current fragmented approach to child care, including state-funded, federally funded, and private models. Chapters 5 through 7 explore what the mixed-delivery system is and how it works in different settings. Chapter 8 explains how universal preschool and mixed-delivery care differ and describes the effects of universal preschool on funding. Chapter 9 covers the laws related to implementation of inclusive care in early childhood. Chapter 10 discusses the professional development needed and the implications for stakeholders in mixed-delivery care. Chapter 11 looks at possible solutions for educator compensation. Chapters 12 and 13 walk through the details of creating mixed-delivery partnerships. Chapter 14 outlines ideas for advocacy for mixed-delivery care.





CHAPTER 1

The Child-Care Crisis in the United States

Child care supports every industry in our nation, but it continues to have an unstable infrastructure. Child care was fragile long before the COVID-19 pandemic began, but after mandatory closures, reduced adult-to-child ratios in an effort to limit illness, and a significant workforce shortage, many child-care programs are on the brink of closure (Haspel, 2022).

A MODEL OF FINANCIAL INSTABILITY

The current child-care model in the United States isn't working. Families are the primary funding source for child care throughout the country; however, they cannot afford the true cost of child care. The full cost of services for a child's enrollment includes salary and benefits for each staff member who interacts with the child, fixed expenses such as rent and utilities, liability insurance for the program, food for meals and snacks, consumables such as art materials and cleaning supplies, and building and playground maintenance.

If each family had to pay their equal portion of all these expenses, child care would cost double or triple the rates that families currently pay. Because most families do not have the capacity to finance that type of expense, the cost of child care is subsidized by the salaries provided to the staff members. This means that many full-time child-care employees make so little money that they qualify for many government subsidies in order to care for their own families. It may also mean that child-care



staff members do not earn enough money to send their own children to the facilities in which they work.

Although most child-care program owners would love to pay their staff members more, it is hard to continue raising the cost of care for families and expect them to continue to enroll their children. Child care is one of the few industries where supply-and-demand principles do not work. Many areas of the United States are considered child-care deserts, meaning that there is not enough available child care for the families who need to find care for their children. Although there is a demand for more quality care, entrepreneurs are not opening more child-care programs—whether in centers or in family child-care homes—due to the great risk of losing money or having to close their new businesses. These desert areas also show that certain populations of children, such as children with disabilities, children experiencing homelessness, and children from minority families, may have even less access to child care than the majority demographics in their areas.

When children do not have access to safe, high-quality child care, parents must make the tough decision to stay home and care for their children. That could mean that one adult is supporting an entire household on a small income. In other cases, it may mean that the family has no source of income and must apply for government subsidies to cover the costs of consistent housing, a stable food source, reliable transportation, and necessary medical care. Ultimately, the goal is for the adults in the home to have reliable jobs that can provide for the family, and that goal requires child care.

From the perspective of the business community, it can be a waste of resources to lose a qualified and valuable employee due to a lack of consistent child care. During a workforce shortage when each business has vacant positions, child care can be one of the major reasons that skilled adults are not applying for positions in their preferred field. Unstable child care can cause parents to miss work regularly, drop from full-time to part-time status, decline a promotion, or leave a position entirely. A lack of child care during evenings and weekends can prevent hospitals, manufacturers, retailers, or restaurants from obtaining necessary staff. The business community has as much of a vested interest in child care as many family members do.

Ultimately, this is a problem that affects a huge portion of the populace, so the nation needs to begin to address the issue.

A CALL TO ACTION

No single solution will solve the problem; however, there are possible solutions that can address the current child-care crisis. In 2021, I wrote *America's Child-Care Crisis: Rethinking an Essential Business* (Vanover, 2021) because COVID-19 highlighted and exacerbated the challenges of the already fragile child-care ecosystem in the United States. I concluded *America's Child-Care Crisis* with a call to action, which suggests in part:

- Paying early childhood educators a competitive wage
- Prioritizing the growth of family child-care homes
- Getting business buy-in
- Ensuring that all children have equal access to a high-quality child-care environment
- Disbursing public funding into private child-care programs to improve their financial stability

Each of these actions addresses problems within the child-care community that need to be resolved to strengthen child-care infrastructure and make sure that families who need quality child care have access to it.

PAYING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS A COMPETITIVE WAGE

The most powerful way that the community can show respect to early childhood educators and demonstrate the value of the industry is to begin paying the early childhood workforce a competitive wage. If early childhood educators can work a full-time job and still qualify for a government subsidy, then clearly their contribution to working families and to growing healthy young children is not properly acknowledged. There should not be a significant wage gap between qualified kindergarten teachers, preschool teachers, and infant/toddler teachers. There must be a way to raise up the educators devoting their careers to preparing young children to become our future workforce.

Different states are finding innovative ways to increase salaries and enlarge the workforce. Some states have implemented wage-supplement programs that can provide additional stipends on top of what private child-care programs are already paying their staff members (Urban Institute, 2022). Other states are waiving the

cost of child care for child-care employees' own children in an attempt to make their wages competitive with those in other industries (Loewenberg, 2022). These innovative practices will be essential to attract and retain qualified teachers to be a part of the early childhood education system.

PRIORITIZING THE GROWTH OF FAMILY CHILD-CARE HOMES

For many reasons, the number of family child-care homes in the United States has decreased significantly during the past ten to fifteen years (Child Care Technical Assistance Network, 2020). One predominant factor is the retirement of a generation of early childhood educators who also became small-business owners by running a child-care program in their homes. Other contributing factors are found in bureaucracy, such as local zoning laws that may prevent a small business from operating in a residential area.

Whatever the reason for the decrease in numbers, family child-care homes play an essential role in many communities. First, many families may not want to take an infant or young toddler to a large child-care center; a family child-care home is a smaller, more personal environment that may be more inviting to some families. Home-based care can also be a safer environment for children who are medically fragile or who have a developmental delay that causes them to feel overwhelmed in larger groups. Finally, family child-care homes offer families a cozier environment where siblings have the opportunity to be together (Weisenfeld and Frede, 2021).

Family child-care homes can be greatly beneficial in small, rural communities where homes may be spaced far apart from one another. A child-care center may not be able to attract enough families to travel a large distance to attend, but a family child-care home may need only three to five families to reach full enrollment. Also, family child-care homes have a great deal more flexibility for their hours of operation. Many can offer evening and weekend hours without having to find additional staff who are willing to work during that time frame. Parents may also feel more comfortable placing their children in a family child-care home for nighttime care because it may feel more like their own home than a child-care center. Family child-care homes can also be an important vehicle for child care in states where the cost of commercial property is too expensive for the typical child-care program.

To grow the number of family child-care homes throughout the country, states need to make active efforts to recruit and mentor child-care providers who also want to become small-business owners. This may require states to offer start-up funding for potential family child-care homes. Local communities need to be aware that family child-care homes are not like normal storefront businesses, and zoning regulations

should not prohibit them from opening in a residential area. Also, local zoning fees should not be cost prohibitive for child-care providers. Many child-care providers have a degree or certificate in early education, but they may not have had business training. States need to provide training programs for family child-care providers to learn about budgeting, marketing, meeting regulations, and preparing taxes for their small business. These small steps may help increase child-care access throughout the state, but especially in rural areas or during non-traditional hours of operation.

GETTING BUSINESS BUY-IN

The business community is slowly becoming aware that increased access to child care is a benefit that employees may value just as much as paid leave or health insurance. Plus, with families having children later than in previous generations, an employee may have worked for the company for years and may have become a valuable asset before deciding to become a parent. At that point, the company has a vested interest in retaining the employee after the child arrives.

Due to the varying sizes of businesses and different age ranges of employees, not every employer needs to provide on-site child care for its employees. An employer should conduct a needs assessment to understand what the child-care needs are and how to support employees with young children. On-site child care is a huge benefit for a larger company, but it is not the only opportunity that employees may appreciate. Many employees may want to keep their children in a program that they have previously selected, so a monthly stipend toward employee child care may give staff the support they need while still allowing the families to choose the program that is best for their children. Other businesses may create an agreement with one or more local child-care programs to prioritize the enrollment of their employees and offer them a slight discount for their tuition; in return, the employer will compensate the child-care program for this consideration for its employees.

Whatever type of child-care support is offered, it is important for the employer to remember that employees have lots of different job opportunities, and a benefit such as child-care support may be the difference in a potential employee's selecting one business over another.

ENSURING THAT ALL CHILDREN HAVE EQUAL ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY CHILD CARE

All children should have equal access to high-quality child care, regardless of race, ethnicity, disability, or the family's ability to pay. When a child-care program is operating on a minimal budget, it can be overwhelming to support a child with

challenging behaviors. Whether the behaviors come from a diagnosed disability, experience with previous trauma, a medical condition, or a different special need, child-care programs may not have the resources to support a child in the way that she needs. This means that many children may bounce from one child-care program to another as centers tell the family that they don't have the ability to support the child. In small communities with only a single program available, a family may not have lots of choices for child care. Centers that do support children who exhibit a variety of behaviors and have special needs may be well out of the price range of many working families.

Every child should have the opportunity to access a safe, high-quality child-care program. Head Start works hard at making sure that families living in poverty can access high-quality care, but many Head Start programs only offer half-day care (Office of Head Start, 2022). Also, most communities have a waiting list for available Head Start spots. Child-care subsidies may be able to cover part of the cost of child care, but the highest-quality programs usually charge more than the maximum subsidy rates. That weekly overage fee may be more than a family can afford and may prevent the child from attending a quality program.

Communities need to brainstorm ideas on how to develop high-quality child-care environments in all local neighborhoods. Philanthropies need to partner with non-profit groups that can make sure young children have access to full-day child care for working families and not just three hours of care per day. Public school systems need to partner with local organizations to make sure that each elementary school has an after-school program for families who cannot leave work to pick their child up at 2:30 each afternoon. Developing access to care across communities will not only help more families participate in the workforce, but it will also prevent very young children from being left alone or supervised by only a slightly older sibling, options that could lead to accidents and injury.

MODELS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

The three main models of early childhood education in the United States are public school preschools, federally funded programs (Head Start and Early Head Start), and private child-care programs. Private programs can be either child-care centers or family child-care homes and are primarily funded by tuition paid by families. State-funded preschool and Head Start are financed through government funding. *Mixed-delivery* early childhood education entails a partnership between two of the three models to create a more enhanced early childhood experience (Early Care and Education Consortium, 2021).

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THE US CHILD-CARE SYSTEM IS **IN CRISIS**

Child care supports every industry in our nation, but it has an unstable infrastructure. The current model simply isn't working. Child-care businesses are failing, early childhood professionals are not paid living wages, and expenses are rising. The primary funding source is families, but families cannot afford the true cost of child care. Does this mean that all early childhood programs must fold into the public school system? Will private child care soon be extinct?

In **Bridging Gaps: Implementing Public-Private Partnerships to Strengthen Early Education**, author Sarah Taylor Vanover dispels the myths and explains the opportunities of a mixed-delivery system. Discover the benefits and challenges of child-care partnerships such as Early Head Start with private and family child-care settings and private child-care programs with state-funded preschools. Explore how to address credentialing, professional development, and implementing IDEA, and learn the differences between mixed delivery and universal pre-K.



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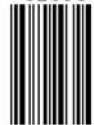
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