

milwaukee journal sentinel

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Child care is in crisis. High costs hurt parents and providers. | Opinion

Early childhood education is a springboard to lifelong success for kids. It's a necessity for many parents to participate in the workforce and a lifeline to businesses who depend on a deep talent pool

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April 16, 2025, 5:03 a.m. CT

Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

Wisconsin's child care system is facing a crisis due to rising costs, limited availability, and insufficient state support.

Proposed solutions include stabilizing child care providers with increased funding, strengthening Wisconsin Shares subsidies, and raising early educator wages.

Current challenges include low wages for educators, high co-pays for families using subsidies, and underutilization of existing programs.

The authors urge Wisconsin residents to contact their legislators and advocate for increased investment in early childhood education.

Early childhood education is a game-changer. It's a springboard to lifelong success for kids. It's a necessity for **many parents** to participate in the workforce and a lifeline to businesses who depend on a robust talent pool.

However, despite its well-documented benefits for families, employers and the economy, **child care** is in crisis. With costs rising, availability shrinking and state support limited, the child care market in Wisconsin's urban, suburban and rural areas alike is unable to meet the demand, leaving communities in dire circumstances.

Our children and our state's future **deserve solutions** that deliver on the promise offered by access to affordable, high-quality early education. Here are three things

we could do in the Badger State to turn the tide:

Stabilize child care providers with public and private dollars

Identify new sources of funding to help stabilize early childhood education providers and prevent devastating closures. Stabilizing this essential industry requires a consistent source of financial resources. Securing new sources of funding would minimize provider closures, ensuring families can remain in the workforce, keeping the state's communities and economy growing.

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Supply is not meeting demand. Razor-thin margins and severe staffing shortages have significantly reduced the availability of care. More than 50% of the state and 70% of rural areas have just [one licensed](#) child care slot for every three children under age 5. More than 34,000 infants and toddlers in the state lack access to safe, regulated care, and waitlists in rural Wisconsin for families who need [care exceed 25,500 spots](#).

Circumstances will not improve on their own. Recently, 663 Milwaukee child care providers surveyed by [Milwaukee Succeeds](#), the Greater Milwaukee Foundation's strategic education initiative, indicated the vast majority of pandemic relief funds they received have been used for basic operating costs like rent, food, utilities and supplies. Inflation is pressuring budgets even further, and at least 15% of providers surveyed said they expect to close when [emergency funding](#) expires in June.

As we speak, other states are pursuing innovative options for getting more public and private funding into the sector. Retaining a dated, dysfunctional model for funding child care carries a high risk for harming Wisconsin children, families and employers.

Opinion: [Changes to Social Security would cost average Wisconsin resident \\$7,000 a year](#)

Spread the word about family help provided by Wisconsin Shares

Strengthen Wisconsin Shares subsidies for lower income, working families so more households can afford care. Wisconsin Shares is a worthwhile program with the potential to have much greater impact if it covered more child care slots, reduced co-payments for families, increased eligibility to reach more families and simplified the application process.

Opinion: [Musk, billionaires took over Wisconsin Supreme Court race. The joke is on us.](#)

The expense of child care puts it out of reach for too many who need it. Families with one infant, for example, pay [\\$11,900 per year](#) on average at a child care center. And programs designed to help those with lower incomes aren't helping enough. Families in Wisconsin pay the highest co-payments on child care subsidies in the country – up to 17% of their household income for a family of three. You'll find co-pays of 5% and 5.7% in [Minnesota and Michigan](#) respectively.

Challenges accessing Wisconsin Shares also leads to underutilization. Only [18 percent](#) of eligible children are enrolled in the subsidy program. We need to expand the access, grow the resources, and then better connect people to them.

Help workers receive pay that fits training and experience

Advance policies that increase compensation for early educators to reduce high rates of staff turnover. The staggering rates of turnover experienced in the child care sector could be mitigated if educators received dignified, livable pay commensurate with their training and experience.

Even though early education teachers are entrusted to nurture our youngest learners during critical stages of development, lack of investment in the sector has depressed their wages to poverty levels. At a time when the cost of living is rising rapidly, early educators are earning an average of [\\$12.99 per hour](#), predictably leading to low recruitment and retention rates. Wisconsin providers report they are under capacity by [33,000 children](#) – meaning low staffing levels caused classrooms closures,

reducing the number of children served compared to the number they could have otherwise served.

Simply put, a living wage leads to more consistent staffing, which in turn means greater access to care for families.

Early childhood education's challenges all point to a flawed business model where parents can't afford care, providers can't afford staff and rising operational costs, and staff can't afford to stay in the profession. Meanwhile, Wisconsin businesses suffer as current and potential employees opt out of the workforce in the absence of quality child care. This is a systems issue, so systems solutions are needed.

And while one person cannot enact such change on their own, our voices are powerful together. Lawmakers in Madison are currently debating the state budget, and your opportunity to be heard is now. We encourage you to contact your state representatives and senators to educate them on the importance of early childhood education for Wisconsin's children and families, our economy and our future. Let them know that these three things could make all the difference.

► **Want to [contact your state legislator](#)?** Here's where you can [find your representatives](#).

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