

Sens. Melissa Agard and Kelda Roys: Wisconsin must act to keep child care providers open

By: State Senator Melissa Agard (D-Madison) and Senator Kelda Roys (D-Madison)

If parents do not have child care, they cannot go to work. The Wisconsin child care industry is on the brink of collapse, and in absence of significant and swift action from the state, the widespread closure of daycare centers will be catastrophic for our economy and our families. Parents will be forced to exit the workforce in droves to take care of their children.

The good news? There is a proven program that provided vital support and kept this essential industry afloat during a global pandemic. Child Care Counts, a program created with federal dollars during the pandemic, helped more than 4,300 child care providers keep their doors open, retain or recruit 22,000 child care professionals, and ensure high-quality care for more than 113,000 kids. But the child care crisis long predated the pandemic – indeed, over the past 20 years, Wisconsin has lost more than half its child care providers, and 50% of the state is now a child care desert, meaning 1 slot for every 3 children who need care.

But, with federal pandemic dollars ending, this crucial program is set to expire in just a few months, leaving child care providers questioning how they will make ends meet to remain open. Recent surveys have shown that if the Child Care Counts program isn't extended by the state, 25% of Wisconsin providers would likely close permanently, 60% of providers would likely raise tuition, and others would cut wages for already underpaid workers, spurring an exodus from the workforce, resulting in even more closures.

Legislative Democrats unanimously supported full funding for Child Care Counts in the state budget, while every single Republican in the legislature voted to eliminate funding. In the wake of that recent decision, child care providers around the state have already announced closures and tuition hikes.

On Wednesday, September 20, the legislature has another opportunity to stand up for early childhood educators, working families, and our kids. Governor Tony Evers called a special session of the Wisconsin State Legislature to invest \$1 billion into the workforce, including funding Wisconsin's Child Care Counts program. We enthusiastically and whole-heartedly support this investment, and call on our Republican colleagues to answer the plea of parents, child care providers, and employers throughout Wisconsin.

Republicans have offered no serious proposals to address our workforce shortage – and their refusal to fund child care will make the problem significantly worse. Let us be clear: inaction will make child care even more unaffordable and will lead to parents leaving the workforce and families losing economic security. Rather than investing in a proven program to create more childcare slots by ensuring providers can afford to pay teachers a living wage, Republicans recently put forth a package that will put our children in danger.

The Republicans' "grand plan" for childcare does nothing to attract and retain early childhood educators, but rather focuses on the deregulation of childcare centers, allowing more children per teacher and decreasing age requirements for providers.

While this approach may work on a spreadsheet, it does not work if you've actually spent time with children – imagine being responsible for nine two-year-olds. And then imagine doing it for \$12 an hour with few benefits! This is not a sustainable or safe practice for our children or our early childhood educators, many of whom have college degrees in their field.

As parents ourselves, we know what a leap of faith it is to leave our kids in the hands of other caregivers, and we also know it is an economic necessity for most Wisconsin parents. Ensuring that our babies, toddlers, and pre-kindergarteners receive high quality care in safe environments should be a priority for all Wisconsin lawmakers and citizens – these little ones are our future, and 90% of brain development happens before age 5.

The Child Care Counts program helps providers keep their doors open, retain talented staff by supporting wages, and keep tuition manageable by closing the gap between the cost of providing care and what parents can afford to pay. While more can and should be done to make the childcare industry and provider wages more sustainable, funding Child Care Counts is a necessary first step to stabilize the industry and prevent the loss of care for an estimated 80,000 children across the state, [according to The Century Foundation](#).

Democrats are working for Wisconsin, and we will continue to be tireless advocates for child care providers, working families, and children. Early childhood educators are the workforce behind the workforce – as necessary infrastructure for our economy as roads and bridges. We must provide the resources necessary for the child care industry to function, so parents can work today and so our youngest Wisconsinites have the brightest possible tomorrow.