



**Testimony before the Select Subcommittee on the
Coronavirus Crisis on “COVID Child Care Challenges: Supporting
Families and Caregivers.”**

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Good afternoon, 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 a mother of five children between the ages 7 and 16. I’ve been a stay-at-home mom without paid child care; and I’ve also used different paid childcare and preschool arrangements.

The COVID pandemic provided us with some valuable lessons about the childcare sector and how policymakers can best support families and caregivers. I’m going to quickly run through five big takeaways.

1. Don’t Make Child Care and Preschools Operate Like K-12 Public Schools

First and most importantly, our experience with COVID showed us that we should reject any public policy changes that would make our childcare and preschool systems function more like our K-12 public schools.

Like many working parents, during COVID-19, I had to juggle my job along with managing my kids' schooling online. Where I live, most private schools provided in-person service by fall 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.

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 did stay 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.

2. Reduce Regulations to Increase Quantity of Daycare Providers and Diversity of Type

The second big takeaway is that 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. COVID forced many daycare providers out of business, but sadly this was building on a bad trend: the number of [at-home daycare providers fell](#) by half between 2005 and 2017.

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 quality of care. A [review of childcare regulations](#) around the country reveals ludicrous examples of regulations dictating the minutiae of daycare facilities such as exact art supplies and other toys, which clearly just create headaches and drive up costs for providers.

3. Financially Support Families, Not Daycare Providers

Thirdly, policymakers should consider tax relief for parents who have young children, since they often face the largest expenses. However, policymakers should not make financial support conditional on childcare arrangements. Incentivising 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.

4. 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 childrens' 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 isn'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.

5. Beware That Government Funding Comes With Strings

Finally, the recent proposal for child care in the Build Back Better plan would have made the federal government the biggest player in daycare and preschool programs. This is tremendously dangerous and should be rejected.

Put aside the enormous costs for taxpayers and potentially for millions of families. These government regulations will discourage the development of innovative and diverse childcare providers and undermine faith based childcare centers (today, [51%](#) of working parents use faith-based child care).

In fact, all of the battles we see raging about public K-12 schools – over the content of 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 government becomes the primary funder and sets the rules for what constitutes an approved daycare provider. If government takes over, we should also expect union-driven disruptions similar to those parents who have endured during K-12 teacher strikes and COVID-era school closures.

Parents and policymakers should reject this as a clear and inappropriate role for the federal government. Head Start shows just some of the problems you can expect with federal management of child care. Head Start programs provide [fewer hours](#) at 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](#).

Consider that right now, mask mandates are lifting everywhere, even here in the U.S. Capitol. But children have been among the last allowed to unmask, despite studies showing that masking young children isn't just useless, but is actively harmful. Yet today two year olds in Head Start are still having masks forced upon them.

Why? Because the federal government has seen masking children as a political symbol and has clung to these masking policies to please their political base. I don't impugn motives lightly, but how else are we to interpret the inconsistent and indefensible masking policies that exist today?

Two year olds should not be political footballs for federal officials. We need to keep the federal government as far away from deciding what happens in day care and preschool as possible.

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