



COMMENTARY – SEP 17, 2018

Chloe Learey: Strategies to increase child care slots

In the recent survey by the Child Care Counts Coalition of Windham County employers indicated that challenges around child care create a burden on business. A lack of quality, affordable child care impacts existing business as well as healthy economic development. The shortage of child care spots, especially for infants and toddlers (ages 0 to 3), has been well researched. We cannot afford to ignore this issue if we want our region and our state to attract a vibrant workforce and support thriving communities.

This is not a new issue in Vermont. Twenty years ago, a group called the Child Care Fund of Vermont issued a report titled [“A Vermont Employer’s Guide to Child Care Solutions”](#) which offered strategies for employers to consider in order to support employees who juggle the demands of parenting. Today, several organizations have picked up this idea of investing in a variety of projects aimed at supporting child care in Vermont. These initiatives are working to identify statewide opportunities and develop local initiatives to make a difference. While individual employers can develop their own strategies for supporting employees, the issues around child care are larger than any one company, and it will take a coalition to move the needle on some of the biggest challenges we face in maintaining and increasing the child care slots needed to support economic growth.

Challenge #1: There are not enough early educators.

Early care and education are not babysitting. The field has become more professionalized with the need for more qualifications. Right now, there are two local programs that are reducing their available spots for children due to a lack of staff, and one that has a classroom ready to open but cannot find teachers.

Strategy 1: Invest in workforce development.

Investing in workforce development, from creating opportunities for people to get in on the ground floor to subsidizing their education at the college level, addresses this challenge. For instance, the Windham Regional Career Center is sponsoring a course for people interested in getting the baseline qualifications for being able to be hired into a classroom position. “Fundamentals of Early Childhood Education” will run from Sept. 24 to Nov. 19 and could help generate up to 12 potential employees.

Strategy 2: Subsidize post-secondary education.

In a field that boasts some of the lowest wages of any job classification, college credits are a requirement for climbing the early educator career ladder. Supporting people to

pursue advanced degrees will make the field more attractive. The United Way of Windham County has a Fund for Quality Early Education that provides resources for a range of activities that help improve the field, including money for professional development. Growing this fund can help more people enter and stay in the profession. This local solution can be adapted to other regions. More broadly, the state could consider some sort of loan forgiveness program or subsidizing the education of students in early education at Vermont state colleges.

Challenge #2: There are not enough slots.

[“Stalled at the Start”](#) estimates that 73 percent of infants in Windham County likely will not have access to a regulated program, and people get on waiting lists as soon as they find out they are pregnant.

Strategy: Provide funds to increase infrastructure.

Vermont Birth to 5, an initiative of The Permanent Fund, has created a statewide grant program, “Make Way for Kids,” to give funds towards projects that will increase quality child care slots. This concept could be expanded locally using the Windham County United Way Fund for Quality Early Education as well. So, for instance, if someone considers opening a program out of their home and needs to make some renovations, they could apply to the fund for assistance.

Challenge #3: Child care is too expensive.

Strategy: Increase scholarships and subsidies for families.

One of the conundrums in solving the child care puzzle is how to cover costs of providing the service and pay a wage that attracts a strong workforce without increasing tuition which already costs as much as housing every month. Employers can offer benefits that help alleviate the financial burden such as Flexible Spending Accounts and direct financial assistance such as a child care allowance. The costs of turnover and absenteeism help pay for the investments employers might make in this way. Child Care Fund of Vermont laid out these and other options 20 years ago!

There are concrete steps we can take together to solve the child care puzzle. If all the pieces fall in place, our future workforce gets the strong foundation they need to succeed, our current workforce can participate in the local economy, and our communities will grow and thrive the way we hope.

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