

MEMORANDUM

Subject: Emerging Politics and The Case for Child Care
From: Lorella Praeli, President & Wendoly Marte, Director of Economic Justice
Date: January 28, 2020
To: Whom It May Concern

As the Democratic Presidential field winnows down and we head into the early caucus and primary states, voters will increasingly focus their attention on the issues that shape their lives and cast their votes accordingly. The last year has put into sharper focus the emerging politics of access to affordable and quality child care and to the movement powering the issue at the local, state, and federal levels.

The growing movement for child care.

Community Change Action and our partners have been on the frontlines of building power and elevating the voices of mothers, families, and providers in this debate. In our work, we've discovered that child care is a classic "kitchen table" issue with broad popular appeal. Access to affordable child care is an urgent practical concern to millions of American families ranging from very low-income to upper middle class; more than 40% of Americans say they have been personally impacted by the cost and availability. Voter support for investing public resources in the education and care of young children routinely polls at 75% or higher, cutting across ideological and partisan lines.

Child care is also an "identity" issue that speaks at a deeply personal level to constituencies that are the core of the progressive base. Child care is a growing concern for all families across the country. However, the burden of the care crisis is not distributed evenly but falls disproportionately on women, especially low-income mothers who are in a daily struggle to make ends meet. The poverty-level pay and meager benefits offered to child care providers and preschool teachers are inseparable from the gender and racial composition of those workers.

The empowerment of women, especially Black and brown women, is an important undercurrent in the conversation about child care. For them, having access to child care is as much about their own power to care for their families how they see fit as much as it is about their liberation and financial freedom. Our failure to help struggling parents or provide living wages to caregivers is not just bad economics, but emblematic of an ideological system that devalues their work and their lives.

So it's no surprise that over the past five years, the convergence of an everyday crisis and a larger justice narrative has sparked a grassroots movement for child care, spearheaded by women of color and supported by a broad coalition that includes feminists, educators, child advocates, faith communities, labor unions, small business owners, and parents from all walks of life.

The movement has generated a spate of community-based campaigns to expand pre-K programs, increase child care subsidies for low-income parents, raise wages for providers, and win new sources of revenue for early learning and care. Across these campaigns lies a bold vision for a universal and targeted approach to child care and early learning – one that addresses the broader crisis and tackles the inequity and disproportionate impact on low-income communities and women of color. We are leveraging the resonance of the issue to build a powerful political base, one that unites women and their families across race and class.

Long dismissed as a second-tier issue among media and political elites, child care has suddenly jumped to the main stage. The evidence of political traction is now visible in many venues:

1. **Voters**

American voters have long been supportive of deeper public investment in early care and learning. What has changed is the intensity of that support and its significance for political behavior. For example:

- A [joint poll](#) by Community Change Action and Center for American Progress in 2018 found that candidates who embrace affordable child care as a top issue receive a 27% point bump in voter support.
- Another poll by the Center for American Progress found that 47% of Americans have personally struggled to find quality, affordable child care, and 54% say finding quality, affordable health care is a serious or very serious problem in their locality. Most importantly, 77% support more child care and early education funding, with 43% saying they strongly support it.
- A recent Latino Decisions poll found that child care was the 4th biggest issue (after immigration, health care, and civil rights) for Latinx voters in Arizona and Nevada.

2. **States**

The growing magnitude of the crisis and the groundswell of community activism has raised the profile of child care and encouraged candidates and policymakers to take notice. Grassroots organizing led gubernatorial candidates from a disparate set of states – including Gavin Newsom (CA), Michelle Lujan Grisham (NM), Stacey Abrams (GA), Tim Walz (MN), Gretchen Whitmer (MI), and J.B. Pritzker (IL) – to make early care and learning a major theme in their 2018 campaigns. After the election, this continued to be a political priority:

- An [analysis of inaugural speeches](#) by FiveThirtyEight found that Governors were talking more about early learning than any other education issue; and
- A [study](#) by the Center for American Progress showed that nearly 2/3 of the nation's governors were proposing increases in funding for early care and education in their 2019 budgets.

In many states, political support for the issue has already translated into significant policy commitments:

- California led the way last year, allocating more than \$600 million in new funding for child care and early learning programs;
- New Mexico raised the eligibility ceiling for child care subsidies;
- Illinois raised wages for 14,000 child care providers;

- Oregon and Washington created high-level task forces to find solutions to the child care crisis;
- And even the deep red Ohio Legislature coughed up \$10 million to fund wage incentives and other measures to enhance the quality of early childhood education.

3. **Presidential campaigns**

The first breakthrough for a comprehensive solution at the federal level came in the 2016 presidential primaries when both Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders embraced universal child care as a policy goal. It was the most explicit advocacy for child care by presidential candidates in many years, but neither candidate offered detailed proposals, nor did they make it a central theme in their campaigns.

Today, the issue is front and center. Elizabeth Warren's universal child care plan comes with a \$70 billion annual price tag, which will be paid for by her signature tax on wealth. She has since made the plan a central motif in her campaign, telling crowds, including on the debate stage, that with revenue from the wealth tax “we can provide universal child care for every baby in this country and raise the wages of every child care worker and preschool teacher in America.”

Other presidential candidates have echoed Warren's call for greater investment in early learning and care, including Bernie Sanders, who has specifically called for universal early childhood education.

We have also seen escalating visibility of child care in the presidential debates. The Atlanta, GA debate in November 2019 included a child care question for the first time, the Los Angeles, CA debate in December 2019 had several references to child care, and in [the Iowa debate in January 2020](#), child care was a major topic of discussion.

4. **Congress**

In September 2017, Senator Patty Murray and Congressman Bobby Scott introduced the Child Care for Working Families Act. During the 115th Congress, support for this legislation continued to grow, ultimately leading to 33 Senator and 140 House members signing on as co-sponsors. This was a comprehensive bill which, among other things, created a de facto entitlement to child care for lower-income families. It was a bold vision to offer at a moment when core safety net programs like Medicaid and SNAP were under heavy attack in Congress. Despite the political environment, these progressive policies have strong support in Congress, reflecting the importance of this issue, of having bold solutions, and of the organizing work that's driving it.

That support was manifest the following spring when Congress doubled discretionary funding for the Child Care Development Block Grant, the largest increase in the history of the program. With Republicans controlling both chambers of Congress and the White House, Democrats had few cards to play in budget negotiations, but they chose to make child care a priority at the urging of Murray, Sanders, Warren, and other progressive senators.

The Child Care for Working Families Act was reintroduced in this congressional session and has garnered an increased number of sponsors (172 in the House and 34 in the Senate, as of this writing).

5. **Media and punditry**

Stories about parents, and mothers more specifically, suffering from the prohibitive costs of child care and the low-wages provided to child care providers have been a staple of local journalism for years. What's new in the landscape is a wave of national press coverage that goes beyond the challenges parents face to naming child care as a public challenge that demands a political response. This is an important shift in the narrative, and it adds pressure on candidates and policymakers to make the issue a priority.

Some examples include:

- This [Vox piece](#) on Democratic Presidential candidates' take on the issue
- This recent [NY Times opinion piece](#) by Paul Krugman
- This [local op-ed](#) by NM child care provider and grassroots leader

It's time to move boldly on child care.

Political change has opened the door to a policy breakthrough on child care and early learning. The issue isn't new, but the demands are bolder, the choices more sharply drawn, and the debate is being driven by leaders from directly affected communities who frame child care as a question of values and a test of our commitment to racial and gender justice. As a result, child care is becoming a major political and voting issue and politicians are finally beginning to notice; universal child care legislation is getting traction in Congress; gubernatorial and presidential candidates have made it a major theme in their campaigns; media attention has exploded; and recent polling suggests that voters not only favor public action but view it as a political priority.

For the first time in a generation, we have an opportunity to win national policies to dramatically expand child care subsidies to parents, increase the supply of quality care, and assure that providers are paid a living wage. If progressives do well in the next election, the 117th Congress could move a bold, comprehensive solution to the care crisis that calls for universal child care and improve the lives of millions of Americans, while advancing the idea that child care is a public good and addressing the inequities inherent in the current system.

This is the moment to go big, not small. The danger is to respond to this moment by retreating to an incremental posture by tinkering at the edges of the system while adding small bits of cash to the pot. It's the wrong move from both a policy and political standpoint. It will take a powerful social movement to overcome the compound of structural racism, sexism, and privatism that is the root of our child care crisis. Child care unites communities of color, swing voters, and progressive activists around a narrative that fuses kitchen table economics with the claims of racial and gender justice.

Only a generous vision of change – a narrative of hope and bold aspiration anchored in shared values – can inspire people to join such a movement. Candidates and party leaders should embrace this narrative, engage with the leaders of the grassroots child care movement, uplift bold solutions in their speeches and TV ads, and commit to prompt action when they are in power. In 2020, the grassroots movement of women of color at the forefront of the fight for child care and early learning will continue to organize, vote, and hold our political leaders accountable to this aim.