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Child Care Matters:

Use this Election Season to Uplift High-Quality Child Care and Expanded Learning

Michigan's economy is surging – unemployment is 4% for the [first time since 2000](#). However, labor force participation remains low, especially for young adults, Black and Hispanic parents, and parents in rural areas and high-poverty neighborhoods. Business leaders and workers alike cite access to child care among the state's greatest employment barriers. Parents are not alone at risk of falling behind in this boom: without access to quality child care and after-school and summer learning programs (expanded learning) during critical years for healthy development, children are entering kindergarten behind their peers, and staying behind without access to great programs outside of school.

Accessible High-Quality Child Care and Expanded Learning Matter

Child care and expanded learning are key to Michigan's short- and long-term prosperity. Families need affordable, safe, nurturing options while they work or continue their own job training or education so their children can also learn and grow during critical years. High-quality child care and expanded learning are proven to help build the foundation children need to succeed in school and life, and are the most impactful for children and youth whose families are facing challenges but are too often inaccessible to those families. Graduates of high quality child care are better prepared for kindergarten and achieve at higher levels later on, and expanded learning ensures school-aged children retain their skills and remain academically on-track.

However, access to quality programs is limited: child care can exceed the annual cost of rent, averaging \$9800, and access for children of all ages is particularly difficult, especially for those who work outside of a 9-5 workday. About half of Michigan families live in a ["child care desert"](#) where affordable, licensed care is scarce. We need solutions to expand access to high-quality child care and expanded learning to all families with young and school-aged children. To do so, Michigan must recommit to its child care providers, workforce, and to families in need.

A Viable System for Child Care Providers

Families with lower incomes rely on state support to afford child care, but Michigan's below-market child care subsidy rate makes it difficult for quality providers to serve subsidy-eligible children. Low payments and costly licensing requirements also constrict family, friend, and neighbor providers, who often serve families in child care deserts, parents who work around the clock, or parents who simply trust these providers most. Expanded learning programs, which fill the gap between when classes end and when parents can get home, also struggle to stay open due to federal funding shortages and private funding that has not kept up with need.

Strengthening the Child Care Workforce

Families also depend on having highly skilled child care providers who are equipped to provide for those in their care. Low pay and limited benefits result in few Michigan child care workers with [long-term plans to remain in the profession](#): their average wage in 2016 was just [\\$8.36 an hour](#), barely over minimum wage. Child care providers also need more training and support to

recognize and appropriately respond to the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of young children, especially those resulting from traumatic experiences. In 2016-17, over [1,800 children](#) were expelled from preschool or child care in Michigan, and [national research suggests](#) that children of color are disproportionately expelled. These events not only deprive children of learning opportunities, they foster stress and burnout among child care providers. To expand quality and access, we must strengthen the child care profession.

Shoring Up the System for Those Who Cannot Access Care

For lower-income working families, child care is an especially stressful cost. However, in Michigan, about [one third of children up to age 12 who are eligible for child care assistance do not receive any](#). In addition to the aforementioned barriers, the system's application process is especially burdensome – for example, foster parents, who under state law automatically qualify for child care subsidy, are required to fill out an application anyway, and many more parents are denied or delayed assistance for trivial reasons. These frustrations cause foster caregivers to withdraw from the system and compound the state's foster parent shortage. Removing additional barriers to accessing subsidy wherever possible to streamline the process for families will result in increased access across the board, and especially for families most in need.

What is the Role of Policymakers?

The federal government provides most of Michigan's funding for child care (Child Care and Development Funds and the Child Care and Development Block Grant) and expanded learning options (21st Century Community Learning Centers). The State Legislature appropriates state dollars that are leveraged to draw down federal child care funds; only recently has Michigan provided enough state funds to draw down its full CCDF allotment. The Legislature used to invest state resources into expanded learning programs, but that funding has been cut.

The federal government sets some broad policy guidelines for child care systems, including requiring caregiver FBI background checks and basic health and safety practices, but the State Legislature largely determines how Michigan's child care system functions, including setting reimbursement rates for subsidized families and determining eligibility rules. Policy guidelines for 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs are also set by the federal government.

Suggested Questions for Candidates

- Child care is essential for adults to be able to work. How would you ensure that high quality child care is accessible to more working families?
- Our child care system does not work for hundreds of families who are already eligible, including foster parents and parents who work the third shift. How will you make sure there's a high quality child care option for families in every situation?
- As a parent who relies on the child care subsidy, I struggle to pay for child care. What will you do about this if elected into office?
- As a parent, I struggle to pay for programs for my child when s/he is not in school – after school and in the summer. How will you help me and families like mine ensure that our kids are safe and engaged while we're working?
- As a child care provider, I cannot accept many subsidized kids into my care without going bankrupt. What will you do to ensure child care businesses like my own can stay in business while helping more of Michigan's lowest income families?
- It's hard to make ends meet as a child care professional. What would you do to support the early childhood profession to ensure we keep our child care talent in-state?