



INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

How CSU prepares students to meet the

# CHILD CARE CRISIS

BY LAURIE J. SCHMIDT (M.S., '98)

As anyone who has shared a work-from-home Zoom call with preschoolers during the COVID-19 pandemic can attest, child care is a vital factor in parents fully participating in the American labor force. However, a 2021 report by the UNICEF Office of Research revealed a disturbing fact: the United States ranks at the bottom of the scale among high-income countries when it comes to child care affordability.

The study, which rated 41 countries on key indicators including child care access and affordability, placed the U.S. at number 40, just ahead of Slovakia.

“Our child care system in the United States is considered a failed market,” says Karen Rattenborg, recently retired executive director of the Early Childhood Center at Colorado State University. “Families cannot afford to pay enough so that programs can offer the desired services. At the ECC, our infant program costs \$19,000 per year, and we still lose money. It’s exorbitantly expensive.”

Even before the economic disruptions of the pandemic, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, child care costs increased more than 40% between 1990 and 2011. In the U.S., that burden falls squarely on the shoulders of parents. If you



PHOTOS: Children at CSU’s Early Childhood Center by Ben Ward (B.A., '16), CSU Photography, and CSU Libraries Archives and Special Collections

The Early Childhood Center has been serving children and families in the Fort Collins community since

1929

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—ELISSA BRAUNSTEIN  
CHAIR, DEPARTMENT  
OF ECONOMICS

have children and work, you're responsible for finding and paying for their care during their infant through preschool years.

In addition to cost is lack of availability: Wait lists of up to two years have become the norm in some areas, which means many parents start planning for their child's care long before it's actually needed – sometimes even before they have a child.

And this won't be getting any easier, either. Data analysis by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Center for American Progress indicates that 4.5 million child care slots will likely be permanently eliminated as a result of the pandemic. Low-wage workers and those who must work in person to get paid – many of whom were deemed essential at the beginning of the pandemic – are already feeling this loss most acutely.

Adding to the imbalance between supply and demand is a severe shortage of early childhood teachers. The primary mission of CSU's Early Childhood Center is to train students to work with young children, but there's a catch.

“Parents are paying very high rates to child care programs, but these programs can't afford to pay their teachers and providers the wages they deserve,” says Rattenborg. “So, in many settings children are being cared for by workers who are being paid minimum wage, and that's why it's so hard to recruit people into the field of early childhood education.”

Those who don't have children may feel they aren't affected by the flaws in the system. But according to Elissa Braunstein, chair of the Department of Economics at CSU, it's not quite that simple.

“To a certain extent, parents really end up subsidizing nonparents,” says Braunstein. “The expenses in both time and money of bringing up children are enormous, and as a parent, you're happy to do it because you love them. But you're

also providing an important service to the wider society.

“We can think of child care as in investment in our future,” she continues. “It enables parents to participate in the workforce, and the more people who participate in our paid economy, the more economic activity we have and the higher our rates of economic growth.”

### SHRINKING LABOR FORCE

Having enough workers in the U.S. labor force may soon be more important than ever. Many workers over the age of 55 who left their jobs or were laid off during the pandemic have chosen not to return to work, and by 2030 all baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) will be age 65 or older. Experts say the retiring boomer population, combined with declining birth rates, could lead to negative growth in the labor force in coming decades.

A shrinking labor force also underscores the need for women in the workplace. “We're having this demographic transition where we're going to have fewer workers relative to elder dependents, and one of the ways of managing that is by women increasing their labor force participation,” says Braunstein.

As more women left the home to enter the workforce during and after World War II, caring for children evolved from a free service to salaried labor.

“The interesting thing about child care services is that you have an economic activity that had traditionally been provided by women and families for free,” says Braunstein. “But as family structures have changed and women have increased their labor force participation, that free care that was provisioned has now become increasingly commodified.”

If World War II served to bring more women into the labor force, the 2020 outbreak of COVID-19 did just the opposite.

During the pandemic, more than 2 million women left the U.S. workforce, many because they could no longer find child care. Nearly 20% of working-age adults said the reason they were not working in 2020 was because COVID-19 disrupted their child care arrangements, according to research by the U.S. Census Bureau and Federal Reserve.

Of those, women ages 25-44 were almost three times as likely as men to not be working due to child care demands.

“One thing we have learned from this pandemic is that child care is essential,” says Sonia Semana, the new director of the ECC. “In order for us to move forward and thrive, we will need the assistance of our entire community.”

### PANDEMIC IMPACTS

Like the rest of the CSU campus, the ECC had to close its doors in March 2020 when the University went into remote work/learning mode. The center, which is part of the College of Health and Human Sciences, was able to reopen four months later in July and welcome children back to its classrooms after implementing significant changes. Parents are no longer permitted inside the building, and teachers must greet the children outside and walk them into the classroom.

“With individuals being vaccinated and our multilayer safety protocols at the ECC, we can continue to slowly move toward the new normal,” Semana says. “Children have learned to adjust to the new climate that we live in, and I think we have also. We just need to restructure the way we do things to meet the safety needs of families, students, staff, and children.”

The ECC, which is accredited by NAEYC, has a threefold mission that encompasses teaching, research, and service. Through the service part of its mission, it provides early child care and education for children from 6 months to 6 years. The ECC's primary function, however, is to serve as a laboratory school for the Department of Human Development and Family Studies.

“Our program has always existed for the purpose of training CSU students for careers working with children,” says Rattenborg. “And to train people to work with children, you need to have children in the building.”

Seven observation booths at the ECC enable both CSU

students and researchers to sit behind one-way mirrors and observe children in the classroom setting. These observations have historically been a critical component of student practicums, which give early childhood education majors firsthand experience in planning and teaching within a classroom setting.

“Prior to the pandemic, we had about 1,000 CSU students per year coming in to do observations, so we were a very highly utilized resource,” says Rattenborg.

### POSITIVE PIVOT

When the pandemic brought these onsite observations to a halt, the ECC was faced with an immediate problem: how to continue to meet the needs of CSU students working on the requirements of their degrees. The program enrolls an average of 25 undergraduates and 15 graduate students each year, and when they graduate, they are licensed birth through third grade educators.

“One of the challenges of the pandemic was that it happened in the middle of the semester, and we had 30 to 40 student interns who were placed with us at the time,” says Rattenborg.

Although the ECC now hosts only about a dozen interns and practicums onsite each semester, technology allows many other students to have access to remote observations they previously would have made from inside the observation booths. Teachers made video recordings of children engaged in a variety of activities and provided the videos to faculty in the School of Education at CSU.

Angela Lewis, assistant professor and program coordinator of Early Childhood Education Teacher Licensure in the School of Education, says the video recordings became one of the most valuable tools to come out of the pandemic.

“It turned out that the students were very grateful to be able to pause, rewind, and rewatch the observations,” she says. “We really had to think outside the box, and the ECC went above and beyond in figuring out how to get teacher candidates into the classrooms without having to be physically in the building.”

Kassia Wisneski, a senior majoring in early childhood education at CSU, was one of the students who used the video recordings as part of her academic training.

“Knowing that we were supposed to be doing a practicum [during the 2020 fall semester], a lot of us felt like we weren't going to get enough experience,” she says, but she discovered that observing via the videos had advantages.

“It's sometimes difficult to be in the observation booths

and see everything that's going on in the classroom," she says. "But being able to rewatch the videos and focus on the teacher, then on a student, and then on a different student – it really widens your lens, and you see so much more than you would have if you only saw it once and had to go on memory from that."

**PREPARING THE CAREGIVERS OF THE FUTURE**

In addition to using the video recordings as a surrogate for the observation booths, Lewis says the pandemic forced the department to be creative about how they taught students majoring in early childhood education.

"We really had to redesign all of our professional education courses to a hybridized model that moved beyond classroom teaching and embraced technology," she says. "Pre-pandemic, we focused on the classroom context, and now we know that the definition of classroom has really been expanded beyond anything that we could have possibly imagined."

Semana agrees. "I feel like we cannot go back to that old model due to its many limitations. We must look toward reimagining early education together," she adds.

The hybridized model, Lewis says, could help grow and diversify the population of teachers, a profession long plagued by shortage and low wages.

"Even before the pandemic we were seeing a tremendous teacher shortage, and during the pandemic we experienced mass resignations," says Lewis. "It's really worrisome, and that loops back to our responsibility in preparing professionals to teach within the demands of the profession."

Despite it all, Wisneski says she's still dedicated to her chosen profession.

"I genuinely cannot see myself doing anything else other than teaching," she says. "It can be discouraging to hear things like teachers are leaving the field. But I just feel so passionate when I'm watching the students in the classroom. I know there are many challenges, but I know it's going

to worth it once I get to be a teacher."

**SUPPORTING PARENTS AT CSU**

For its part, CSU is continually striving to provide resources and assistance to both employees and students working on degrees while raising children. The



Child Care Access Means Parents in School program offers financial assistance to income-eligible CSU student parents through financial support for on-campus child care services at the Early Childhood Center or at Sunshine House at CSU.

In addition, Ram Kidz Village is a drop-in child care service at the Morgan Library, available to all currently enrolled student parents. Staffed by qualified students and fully funded by student fees, the service enables student parents to drop off their children (ages 1-11) for a few hours while they study or work in groups onsite at the library. For student parents whose schedules don't work with Ram Kidz Village, staff members have developed activity kits that include games and learning activities to keep children engaged while their parents study or attend class online.

According to Lisa Chandler, assistant director of Adult Learner and Veteran Services, which operates Ram Kidz Village, the kits were especially popular while the campus was operating remotely during the pandemic.

Lessons learned during that time have also informed new policies and procedures being developed as part of the Courageous Strategic Transformation Plan (see Page 13), designed to provide those employees with family responsibilities – either as parents or caregivers for others – greater workplace flexibility and opportunities to thrive both professionally and personally.

**RESHAPING PUBLIC OPINION**

When you look at the weaknesses in the U.S. child care system – high cost, lack of availability, low wages for workers – one thing stands out: child care is often seen as low-skill work and, therefore, is not highly valued. By contrast, countries that partially subsidize child care tend to have populations that view it as a national responsibility, rather than solely a parental obligation.



**"We have a long understanding of the importance of investing in children."**

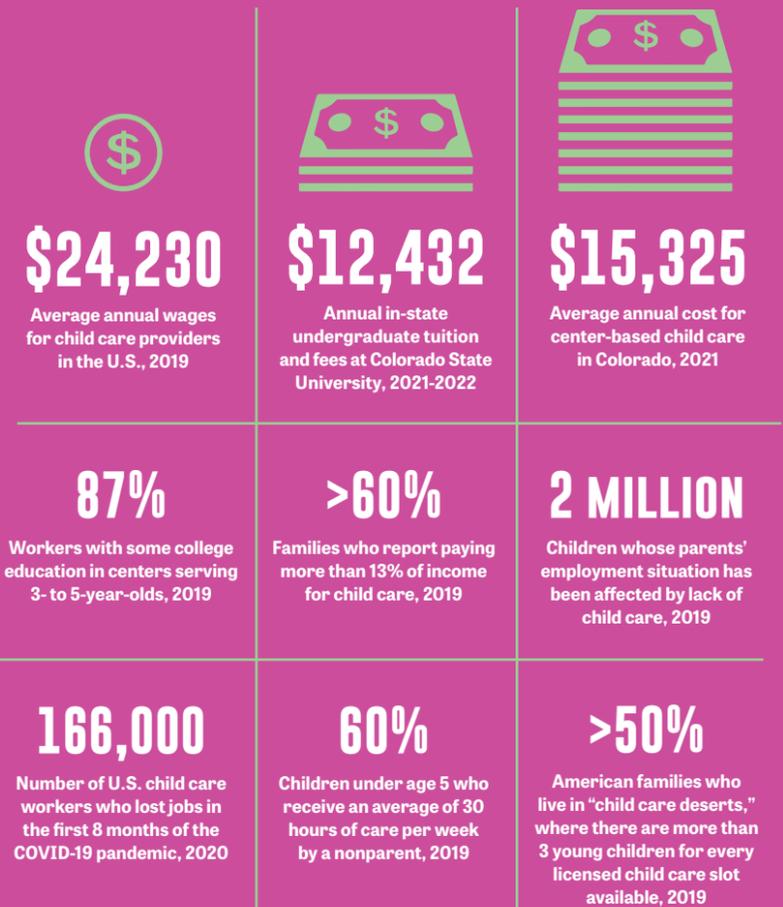
**—SONIA SEMANA DIRECTOR, EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTER**

**What it COSTS**

While the paid child care industry in the United States is valued at more than \$60 billion, statistics show it doesn't come close to serving the needs of working families – or their employers.

The \$400 billion investment in child care for children under the age of 6, proposed as part of the Build Back Better Act, would cap costs at 7% of family income and provide funding to states to increase provider compensation across all settings.

**SOURCES:** World Population Review; Colorado State University Office of Financial Aid; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; Center for the Study of Child Care Employment; National Center for Education Statistics; National Survey of Children's Health; U.S. Census Bureau; U.S. Department of Labor Statistics; Center for American Progress





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—KASSIA WISNESKI (B.S., '22)

“Some other countries have fully funded early care and education, and that makes a world of difference not only for children, but also for their families and for the greater economy,” says Rattenborg.

In France, for example, the social security system provides early child care benefits to offset costs related to the birth (or adoption) of a child, as well as a basic allowance to cover educational and care expenses up to the age of 3 years. Benefits are based on household income and number of dependent children. The system ensures that child care costs don't prevent parents from working.

Changing how the American public views the responsibility of caring for children could be key to improving the system, and Braunstein says she has reason to feel hopeful.

“What I've found really heartening is the shift in public discussion about child care, and hearing folks in Washington talk about it as infrastructure rather than as just social welfare,” said Braunstein. “That is a real shift in understanding the role of child care in our system.”

Making child care a national priority has other benefits aside from boosting the economy through labor force participation.

“We have a long understanding of the importance of investing in children, which is the primary motivation for public education,” says Braunstein. “But the fact is that this doesn't start when kids are 6 years old. Some of the most important kinds of developmental growth happen before that.”

“The research is clear on the importance of early childhood education,” says Lewis. “It's essential for early development, especially from birth to age 5, and early intervention has long-term implications for our youngest members of society.”

Those youngest members of society are our future, says Braunstein, and the reason that all of us – not just parents – have a vested interest in a functional child care system.

“We all benefit from well brought-up children. They become good community members, productive workers, nice neighbors, and they pay into the Social Security system,” she says. “So, it's in everyone's self-interest to ensure that the next generation is highly productive.”

“Whatever your opinion is about social welfare spending, it's difficult to argue with the fact that provisioning education and care for children has strong economic payoffs,” she adds. “We just aren't accustomed to thinking of it in that way, so it's about reconceptualizing it rather than just thinking of it as part of social welfare.” ■