

US child care in existential crisis as schools and businesses reopen

Nick Barrickman
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The Trump administration, backed by the entire political establishment, has placed great emphasis on the need to re-open schools as an essential component to the overall drive to force working people back on the job amid the COVID-19 pandemic. A pillar of this campaign is early childhood care, which faces an existential crisis in health, safety and funding.

Parents suspecting the obvious dangers of COVID-19 have withdrawn children from day cares en masse. According to a National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) survey conducted in June, early childhood enrollment plummeted by 67 percent since March. Roughly five million small children normally in day cares are now largely being cared for by their parents who have had to stay home with them.

In March, the US Congress passed the multi-trillion-dollar CARES Act, which included a meager \$3.5 billion in child care spending while hundreds of billions were allotted to financial firms and other non-essential corporate entities. To date, this is all that has been done to help preserve child care's continued existence in the US.

At least 40 percent of all child care providers expect they will be forced to close unless they receive some sort of government support. Only 18 percent of such providers expect to last another year on their current resources. With the loss of providers, as well as forced limits on class sizes due to social distancing, an additional 450,000 children may be left without day care as facilities reopen.

This shortage of supply will in turn entice businesses to cut corners on safety, licensing and other necessities for entering the child care industry.

Even in places where day cares are able to remain open, teaching staff—forced to choose between making

a living and maintaining their physical health—will be compelled to work under impossible conditions.

“Staff and teachers are going to have a lot of anxiety and stress at day cares,” said Lorena, a child care provider that spoke at length with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the impact of COVID-19 on day care. “I hate to say it, but teachers are not trained for having kids all day, creating curriculum and lesson plans,” she said, adding, “If schools are closed, they’ll have to monitor a child’s actual academic progress” as school aged children will be expected to engage in distance learning.

On top of all of this, there is still the threat of acquiring COVID-19. Lorena commented, “Children are going to get into fights, take off masks and spit at each other. As a teacher, you’re going to want to kneel and get at the kids’ level and take off your mask to show your face to them out of empathy. You’ll be putting yourself at risk in this job.”

Early childhood educators on average make less than \$11 an hour, a mere fraction of their peers even in public schools. The forcing of low-paid teachers to assume the tasks of an accredited grade school educator will have the effect of placing downward pressure on the wages of all teachers, as day care staff struggle with the added difficulties with which they have been saddled.

As schools have begun reopening, incidents of COVID-19 infecting students and youth have become widespread, exploding the claims that young people are either immune to COVID-19 or do not become ill. In late July, two Florida teens succumbed to the deadly virus, adding to the state’s enormous death toll.

An American Academy of Pediatrics study done with the Children’s Hospital Association found that at least 338,000 children have come down with COVID-19 in

the US. In the final two weeks of July, 97,000 children tested positive for the virus.

“Classrooms are modified, according to CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] standards, or at least as best as possible,” said Kendra, who teaches a multi-age classroom in Virginia, to the WSWS. However, she added, “Not all children are able to wear masks.”

“My classes will go up as high as 15 kids as schools reopen in September,” she said. Kendra, who also works in a retirement home, said that despite the high levels of fatal COVID-19 infections in assisted living environments, she felt safer at that job due to a higher level of safety precautions.

A study released this month in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (*JAMA*) found that infants have been known to possess viral loads in their upper respiratory system that are as much as 100 times greater than average adults.

In a comment this month to the *Seattle Times*, child care provider Johnny Otto stated, “You don’t want to advocate for the closure of your own business... But at the same time, when we’re having a debate about what’s healthy for the community and whether public schools should even open in the fall, it’s interesting to me that nobody is having a conversation about why have child cares not been mandated to close in any way, and how are child cares operating with very little social distancing with children in small spaces.”

At least 1,000 facilities in Washington state have been closed due to financial losses during the pandemic. A considerable portion of these closures are in small, home-based facilities. Such businesses make up the majority of child care centers in at least 20 US states, according to a 2019 Child Care Aware of America study.

In addition, the closures of schools and other child care facilities have forced parents to withdraw from the work force. A Brookings Institute report from 2018 revealed that 41 million working people in the United States have children under the age of 18. Of that group, 34 million had kids under the age of 14.

The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics notes that in over 60 percent of married couples with children, both parents work. According to *Vox*, by June at least 13 percent of these parents had either quit their job or were forced to take reduced hours due to having

to take care of their family.

As a result of the pandemic, over 1 in 10 women are currently out of work, having an immense impact on their ability to provide financially for their families. A 2018 study done by the liberal think tank Center for American Progress found that 83 percent of parents had difficulty finding affordable and adequate child care support for their children *prior* to the pandemic.

Lorena also spoke about the conditions facing parents. “They’re going to feel anxious and guilty too. They’re afraid they’ll lose their job if they don’t go to work and send their kids off to day care. At the same time, they’ll be paying for all day plans, no more just after school.”

She remarked pointedly that “a lot of these parents [working in essential jobs] are low wage, and they have to pay the most for care. It is the same circle of people getting hurt” by the pandemic.

“The coronavirus has exposed so many injustices in our society,” Kendra added, noting that after the \$600 extended unemployment benefits ended in July, the government “threw people under the bus. Where are they going to work? Retail? The service industry? They’re all social distancing too!”

Speaking of her own situation, Kendra stated she works two jobs to afford a small apartment in the Northern Virginia suburb where she works. “This is my reality,” she said, “because I choose to live in an area that I work.”

The crisis in child care demonstrates the irrationality of the ruling class’s entire policy of reopening schools and businesses as the deadly pandemic spirals out of control. It is absolutely essential that teachers in all facilities, both private and public schools, form independent rank-and-file safety committees in defense of their rights as workers, as well as in defense of the children and families they take care of, and prepare for a general strike to halt the homicidal back-to-work drive.



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