

In Our View: Child care critical for reopening economy  
The Columbian  
Published: June 9, 2020, 6:03am

Any discussion about reopening the economy and the landscape for schools in the fall must begin with a discussion about child care.

America's child care industry already was teetering, with a lack of facilities forcing many qualified parents to eschew the workforce. Now that industry is breaking under the added pressure of the coronavirus pandemic. In Clark County, about 80 of roughly 200 licensed child care centers have closed.

As businesses reopen and employees are called back to work, the lack of available child care will force many parents to choose taking care of their children instead of returning to work. And the COVID-19 recession will reduce wages for many workers, meaning that child care will not be affordable. These effects will particularly impact low-income workers.

The issue likely will be exacerbated when schools reopen in some form come the fall. State officials are considering, among other options, having students attend school on a rotating basis and combining that learning with online assignments — for example, physically attend school on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

That will increase the burden on parents as they try to balance child care with their own work schedules. If the kids are in school three days a week, care must be secured for the other two days. And if siblings attend class on different days, the situation is even more difficult.

As Michelle Aguilar of Child Care Aware of Southwest Washington explained to The Columbian, child care facilities are small businesses that already operate on razor-thin profit margins and, in many cases, cannot afford to take children on a part-time schedule: "It's going to be even harder for them to make money to keep their doors open."

All of this reflects an inability and unwillingness to deal with the issue when it should have been addressed. In 1971, Congress passed the Comprehensive Child Development Bill with bipartisan support. It would have provided universal child care supported by taxpayers — a public investment for the public good — but was vetoed by President Richard Nixon. The issue then spurred a culture war in which opponents of the bill speciously argued that universal child care would be a Soviet-style system in which the state raised children rather than parents.

Five decades later, child care remains a pressing issue. As Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler, R-Battle Ground, told The Columbian's Editorial Board last year: "This is probably one of the No. 1 issues people with families, young families, come to me about, and it spans the income spectrum. It's remarkable to me. It's one of the top issues that I get asked about."

And that was before COVID-19 wreaked havoc with the economy.

During World War II, the Lantham Act provided federally funded universal child care. When the war ended, the day care centers ended, but Eleanor Roosevelt surmised: "A few of us had an inkling that perhaps they were a need which was constantly with us, but one that we had neglected to face in the past."

Reopening the economy and shortening the recession will require a wartimelike commitment from the United States, and that commitment should include child care. In order for businesses to secure adequate workers and in order for schools to reopen on a partial schedule, parents will need to have a safe, reliable, affordable place to take their children.

Congress and the Legislature must include that in their discussions.