

Opinions

OPINION: We work in childcare in Alaska. Our workforce problem is your workforce problem.

By Blue Shibler, Christina Eubanks Ohana and Candace Richey

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The Puffin Class at Tanaina Child Development Center on Friday, Aug. 13, 2021 in Anchorage. The daycare, which is located on the Alaska Regional Hospital campus, primarily serves families of hospital

employees and healthcare workers. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

If you participate in any part of the economy in Alaska, as an employer, employee, consumer or a passive observer, you likely know we have a significant workforce shortage. While the reasons for the shortage are a bit complex and mysterious, there is one major cause that is undeniable: an insufficient supply of affordable child care.

Child care is a foundational support for Alaska families and the economy that has been under-resourced for far too long and nearly decimated by the pandemic. As COVID-19 pushes us to the brink of the child care sector's collapse, thousands of parents, especially mothers and women of color, have been pushed out of the labor force. The reality is that child care is the workforce behind the workforce – it is the sector that makes work possible for others. Alaska's economy is not going to recover if we continue to short-change the valuable child care workforce that has risked life and health for poverty wages to care for children throughout a crippling pandemic.

A recent study published by the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development found that in March of 2022, 4.1% of Alaskans with children between 5 and 11 had worked fewer hours over the last month because of child care problems, and 2.3% had quit a job to care for children. When the child was younger than 5, the percentages jumped to 12.9% and 5%, respectively.

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With the sole source of revenue for most child care programs being from paid tuition, the industry is at an impasse with families unable to pay more, limiting providers' ability to attract and retain quality classroom teachers. The market failure of the child care system in Alaska justifies the need for public investment. It is time to start investing in child care just as we invest in public schools. After all, it is child care providers who are preparing children for success in public school.

We believe House Bill 149, sponsored by Rep. Zack Fields, and its accompanying child care trust fund, provides an opportunity to change the dynamics of child care in Alaska for generations to come. This bill combines a child care trust with sectoral bargaining to assure efficient and effective use of state dollars by allowing sector members to participate in policy and funding decisions made by the state. A trust will ensure stable funding that will enable the field to recruit and retain a quality workforce. A stable workforce will help increase the availability of affordable quality care for families.

With this innovative legislation and funding model, families will see real relief from rising costs, faith-based providers will have the opportunity for full inclusion, and child care programs will receive meaningful investments to help meet the costs of providing high-quality care provided by adequately compensated early childhood educators.

We appreciate the many legislators who have worked on HB149 over the past year and urge all House members to vote for it.

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Failure to pass HB149 will show a continued disregard for the valuable childcare workforce, prevent economic recovery, and further put Alaska children behind.

Blue Shibler is the former owner of Discovery Preschool in Juneau and the current executive director of the Association for the Education of Young Children - Southeast, **Christina Eubanks Ohana** is the executive director of Hillcrest Children's Center in Anchorage, and **Candace Richey** owns and operates Candi's Tot Stop in Fairbanks.

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