



Mount Kisco Child Care Center
Making The Difference – When It Counts

I thank you for this opportunity to speak and share the challenges being faced by child care centers across NY State and the country. My name is Dawn Meyerski and I am the Executive Director of Mount Kisco Child Care Center and the Co-President of the Westchester Early Childhood Directors Association. I have been working in the Child Care Industry for more than 40 years and the issues have not improved in that time, in fact, they are now reaching crisis levels. The high cost of care and low teacher compensation have put us on the precipice of disaster.

- Child care is unaffordable for most families regardless of income. The average cost of care at a Center in Westchester County is nearly \$2500 per month for one infant. Even middle and upper middle income families struggle to pay the cost of care which can be as much as college tuition or a mortgage.
- Hiring staff to work in child care centers has become virtually impossible. Like all industries, child care has been impacted by labor shortages. Historically lower wages and poor benefits of child care workers have presented a significant challenge as corporations like Target and Starbucks have raised hourly wages and improved their benefit packages to attract workers. Child care centers, with already razor thin margins and rising costs, have been unable to keep pace. Inflation pressures and other cost of living increases have made it difficult for teachers to afford to stay in their jobs. As a result, NY state's child care work force has fallen 42% (Child Care Council of Westchester).
- With families unable to pay more, and teachers unable to continue at their current rate of pay, quality child care is harder to find for families at any income level. Our fragile system is on the verge of collapse.

Mount Kisco Child Care Center operates from 7 am until 6:30 pm Monday through Friday. We serve children from 3 months to 5 years of age as well as children from kindergarten through 5th grade in our before and after school programs and summer camp. Our mission is to provide high quality care and education for all children in the community regardless of their ability to pay the full tuition. 50% of our children pay the full fee and 50% receive a scholarship to attend. Historically, we have had to raise more than \$600,000 per year to provide the scholarships for middle and low income earners. Operating as a non-profit, we are fortunate to be able to raise these funds where others cannot. It's no longer enough.

The only guaranteed source of funding that comes into child care centers is from parent tuition. When we calculate tuition, we look at the whole picture of the Center and the need to provide consistent support for a family through their many years with us. Currently, the tuition in our infant program is \$2423 per month. When calculating the actual cost of care, including ratios required by OCFS for infants and toddlers, the actual cost of care in these younger years exceeds the tuition we charge. While we lose money on every infant and toddler in the program, we cannot charge the actual cost because it would be cost prohibitive for families looking to enter our Center and establish their plan for child care. To that end, we set our tuition lower than actual costs and look to make up the balance as the children age into the preschool and school age programs.

MKCCC accepts subsidized children as well. For each subsidized infant or toddler, we receive \$1636 per month from DSS. This means we fall short by \$9600/year for every subsidized infant or toddler we accept and must separately raise funding to cover the shortfall. Reimbursement rates today are calculated based on market rates, not on the actual cost of care. That must change. If we did not operate as a nonprofit with the ability to separately raise funds to support these children, we could not accept them. Middle income earners would also be left without options.



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Additionally, when subsidized care is linked to the hours that a parent works, it underscores the notion that child care is simply “babysitting”. It is so much more than that. Teachers in child care centers provide rich learning environments that foster cognitive, physical, and social development. Child care centers expose children to people from different socio-economic backgrounds and cultures, and the teachers cultivate an environment of acceptance. Child care teachers not only prepare children for Kindergarten, they prepare them for the many challenges they will face throughout their lives. They teach resilience and perseverance. They teach children to trust and communicate, to manage their emotions and they teach children the importance of being part of a community. They are also responsible for the medical needs of each child. This is incredibly important work. Developing these skills and providing this level of care in a stable, consistent environment is critical for the child. Requiring parents to pick up their child, regardless of the child’s program schedule, is incredibly disruptive and counter-productive to the benefits that an early education program can provide.

Universal Pre-K is being widely explored as a solution for families. Most UPK programs operate on a school day schedule and will leave parents without care for their children in the early morning hours and in the afternoons after 2:00pm. This is NOT a working family friendly option. In addition, UPK funding exclusively streams through public schools. Community Based Organizations who would like to provide UPK programs (and perhaps could provide the wrap around services at the beginning and the end of the day) must be chosen by the school district. The districts can receive up to \$10,000 per child from the state, but the CBO only receives a fraction of that amount once the district takes a percentage for administrative expenses. UPK funding should stream directly to the organization providing the service.

The only way for a child care center to increase salaries for teachers is to increase tuition. We are constantly asking ourselves how much can middle income earners afford to pay before they decide they must leave the work force or explore less expensive options that likely include unregulated care.

The American Rescue Plan had a huge impact on child care. For the first time, centers were able to increase wages and compensate teachers at a higher rate of pay. We were grateful for the federal funding that we received and got a new understanding of what federal funding that streamed directly to child care could do for the industry. Funding that was not linked to low-income children or the public schools. We now face the challenge of how to sustain those increases as the funding comes to an end. If we were to raise salaries to \$18 per hour, which includes scaffolding increases for existing employees, without continued funding, it would cause a deficit of more than \$250,000 and still doesn’t compete with national chains like Target and Starbucks. Many centers in Westchester have long waiting lists with families from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds but classrooms remain empty because they cannot attract and retain staff. Even at Mount Kisco Child Care Center, there are two Head Start classrooms that have been sitting empty since September due to the inability to attract staff.

There has been bipartisan backing for increasing federal funds for child care in the past, but the issue has failed time and again to garner enough support in Congress. Although it was included in the original Build Back Better legislative agenda, child care wasn’t a part of the final reconciliation package. Child care went from being essential during the pandemic to not even being mentioned in the reconciliation package.



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Community based programs, like MKCCC, who are committed to serving all families; high, middle and low income earners, are struggling to make ends meet every day while also compensating and retaining staff. Operating as a nonprofit allows us to fundraise to support families but those that do not have that option are collapsing under the weight of these issues. Even our options are limited, and we are projecting unsustainable deficits.

The child care workforce is grossly understaffed and underpaid; there must be a robust plan for increasing compensation in a significant and sustained way – one that includes wage supplements, to support and sustain a workforce caring for our youngest New Yorkers.