

# After Kentuckians of both parties agree access to child care is vital, Chamber offers to-do list

BY SARAH LADD  
Kentucky Lantern

Most registered Kentucky voters surveyed in June 2024 believe that working families having access to affordable child care is important for the future of the state, according to a recently released report by the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce.

The Foundation for Action report, which includes policy recommendations for lawmakers to consider in 2026, comes as the child care industry is “at an impasse” despite “widespread discussions” and “efforts to address child care challenges” that include high tuition, low wages for workers and a shortage of providers.

That June 2024 survey showed that 85% of registered voters in the state believe Kentucky families need access to affordable child care. It was a bipartisan consensus: 81% of Republicans, 89% of Democrats and 89% of Independents surveyed agreed.

A national survey also shared in the report showed that 79% of American voters were supportive of “federal policies aimed at providing child care benefits to families with young children.”

That, too, was bipartisan, with 69% of Republicans, 88% of Democrats and 82% of Independents surveyed holding that stance.

Helping more people access child care can help improve workforce participation, the report says. Kentucky’s workforce participation is lower than some of its neighbors — about 81%, compared with 86% in Missouri, about 81% in Tennessee and 84% in Ohio.

In 2024, a survey of 1,357 parents from 88 Kentucky counties showed that some parents had already chosen to exit the workforce because of inaccessible child care. Many families put off having more children, delayed big purchases and sacrificed health care needs because of child care complications, the Lantern previously reported.

“Access to high-quality child care is critical for working families and improving learning outcomes for kids,” Ashley Novak Butler, the executive director of the Lift a Life Novak Family Foundation in Louisville, said in a statement. “But to build an early learning ecosystem that can truly deliver for Kentucky families and children, we need collaboration and consensus among all stakeholders on the best path forward. That’s exactly what this project aimed to achieve.”

The chamber’s 50-page report is the result of a 40-member group of business leaders, workforce development experts, child care providers, advocates and more who met between August 2024 and April 2025 to come up with a list of policy suggestions to improve the child care landscape in Kentucky.

“Conversations were not always comfortable, but they were productive,” the report states. “With a focus on the private regulated child care sector, this cross-sector of Kentuckians reached consensus on more than three dozen public policy and programmatic recommendations with specific actionable items for policymakers, business lead-



Preschool children sing before lunch at the iKids Childhood Enrichment Center, a child care provider in Benton, Kentucky. (Kentucky Lantern photo)

ers, nonprofits and philanthropy. Collectively, this work creates a foundation for sustainable, long-term child care solutions in Kentucky and underscores what can be achieved when Kentuckians from different walks of life work together to solve big problems.”

#### What recommendations came out of the report?

The report has a slew of recommendations to stabilize the child care industry. They include:

- Require more transparency in how the state budgets, spends public dollars on child care, including both federal and state dollars.
- Reform and modernize Kentucky ALL STARS, the state’s quality rating system for early childhood programs, including child care centers.
- Develop, publicly display and track more accurate measurements of actual capacity for regulated child care services.
- Create a non-intrusive and voluntary method for tracking and denoting faith-based and employer-sponsored child care services.
- Conduct objective third-party studies to determine the return on taxpayer investments in child care on an annual basis.
- Use a more precise meaningful measure of child care supply and demand gaps than “child care deserts.”
- Ensure that low- and middle-income Kentucky families can afford child care by strengthening the Child Care Assistance Program and Employee Child Care Assistance Partnership.
- Make the child care business model more sustainable by streamlining regulations, alleviating workforce challenges and creating new business opportunities.

■ Encourage more engagement from local communities and employers in solving child care challenges through targeted local matching grants and needs-based economic development incentives.

■ Improve training for child care services to support children with special needs.

■ Create accountable economic development incentives for businesses to create onsite or near-site child care services for their employees and communities.

■ And more.

Dustin Howard, the superintendent of Clark County Public Schools, is quoted in the report as saying, “When Kentuckians have affordable high quality child care choices, our economy and employers win by growing the next generation of a viable workforce while unleashing our current workforce that will continue our upward growth as a Commonwealth,” Howard said.

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