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Massachusetts Parents Struggle to Balance Covid-Related Child Care Concerns with Labor Market Participation and Productivity

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted many inequities in our systems and has also raised broad, concrete awareness of how critical and integral the early education and care sector is to our economy and to the future of this Commonwealth.

The economic impacts of the health crisis left the already-vulnerable child care sector close to collapse. [60% of child care programs](#) around the country closed at least temporarily and a third of the child care workforce lost their jobs. In Massachusetts, the child care sector lost an estimated \$250 million each month during statewide closures.

At the same time, the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on parents of young children nationwide. Research indicates that income loss, financial difficulties, and difficulty providing basic needs are widespread among families with young children during the pandemic, resulting in cascading impacts on both adult and child emotional stresses.

We know that parent demand, real-time supply, employer decisions, and the reopening of K-12 education all impact the short- and long-term future of child care.

With generous support from funders, **Strategies for Children commissioned Beacon Research to conduct a statewide survey of 599 Massachusetts households with young children.** The survey asked critical and timely questions about child care demand and preferences, employer supports, and plans for fall 2020. This is a unique, timely source of Massachusetts-specific data.

The results are striking and highlight the need for cross sectoral collaboration and partnership to solve these challenges. Parents are wrestling with many balancing worries, ranging from health and safety concerns for their children to mental health for both their child and themselves to their ability to participate productively in the workforce.

Key findings include:

- The lack of quality child care will impact labor market participation and productivity: 79% of parents are concerned they will not be able to work without formal care arrangements, and 76% indicate that their quality of work will suffer.
- Child-care related challenges are disproportionately impacting women, who bear the brunt of child caring responsibilities. Only 44% of employed women report that their employer is offering flexible work hours, and only 13% have access to paid family leave.

- Fewer families anticipate utilizing childcare now than they did before coronavirus (76% prior to COVID, 62% anticipate using in the fall). This is especially so for Latino families (from 54% in March to 35% this fall).
- The main factor behind the drop in childcare utilization: in the shadow of coronavirus, parents are concerned about their children's and their own safety: 81% say a child's health is a major factor when deciding on childcare arrangements for the fall.
- But a significant segment of families also say their preferred provider hasn't reopened or is out of business due to the pandemic.
- Parents are very concerned that not sending their children to childcare will lead to negative social, health, and learning consequences.
- Families with young children and school-age children are highly dependent on school plans when making decisions about fall childcare arrangements (52% entirely or mostly dependent), and many are considering suboptimal arrangements, like having older children care for younger children during the school day.
- Latino and Black Households opting out of child care this fall, place an increased emphasis on three factors: a household member is high-risk for coronavirus, our preferred program has closed permanently, and we are on a waiting list for a childcare subsidy. For all households, minimizing coronavirus exposure risk, preferring to have family or friends provide childcare, and childcare programs are unaffordable for our family are top factors for foregoing formal childcare this fall.
- Children's pediatricians, the CDC, and childcare providers are most trusted on childcare decisions.

Amy O'Leary, Early Education for All campaign director at Strategies for Children issued the following statement:

"Parent voices are critical to reopening and sustaining the child care industry. This survey shows that parents have legitimate concerns over health and safety. Many parents cannot return to child care because their programs have closed permanently, are not yet reopened, or are at full enrollment.

"We need more collaboration between local leaders, public school districts and child care programs. **For households with young children and school-age children, more than half (52%) are entirely or mostly dependent on what schools do for their older children, before they can determine fall child care arrangements.** These two worlds are not separate; our families and communities are intertwined and are often forced to come up with solutions to the barriers we have created for them.

"Parent trust of pediatricians is high. This indicates there are new opportunities for collaboration between health experts and child care programs."

"We cannot treat child care as 'one-size-fits all.' Black and Latino families in our survey reported a few key differences in their preferences and barriers to accessing child care."

“More public investment is needed to support child care programs, and ensure that all families in our Commonwealth, regardless of their resources, can access safe, affordable, high-quality early education and care programs.

This survey was conducted by Beacon Research, a Boston-based firm specializing in providing highly accurate, actionable research to political, non-profit and corporate clients.

Funding for the survey was generously provided by the Commonwealth Children’s Fund and Eastern Bank Charitable Foundation.

For full survey results, visit the Strategies for Children website:

[Slides with key findings](#)

[Topline results](#)

[Memo: Child care and schools](#)

<http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/covid-19.html>

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