

**U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions**

**Full Committee Hearing**

**Child Care and Preschool: Cutting Costs for Working Families**

**Tuesday, March 22, 2022**

**10:00 a.m.**

**Testimony by Maria-Isabel Ballivian, Executive Director**

**ACCA Child Development Center**

Thank you, Chairwoman Murray, Ranking Member Burr, and committee members for the opportunity to speak before you about a topic that is closest to the moral, economic, and national security heart of our country: the importance of strengthening our child care ecosystem and reducing costs for working families so that we can better support America's children, workers, educators, and employers.

I am the Executive Director of the ACCA Child Development Center, a NAEYC-accredited, full-day, year-round, nonprofit program located in Annandale, Virginia, that provides high-quality early education for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. After more than five decades of uninterrupted service, our program has become one of Northern Virginia's top community-based providers.

Ninety percent of ACCA families are eligible for child care subsidies. The other 10% are, like so many American working families, living on the edge — making just too much income to qualify for public tuition assistance but far too little to afford high-quality early education. Because ACCA is part of a supportive coalition of churches, we have offset some costs with scholarships. Still, it remains difficult to navigate a system in which neither parent fees nor subsidies or education grants cover the actual cost of quality care in a way that allows programs to sustain salaries and benefits that reflect teachers' experience, training, and commitment to young children.

Early childhood education in America is a broken system in which service is too expensive for working and disadvantaged families, and centers' profit margins are chronically thin. The pandemic has worsened the situation, forcing parents to leave the workforce due to a lack of quality programs. Parents face long waitlists and increased tuitions, and programs confront critical staffing shortages, supply chain disruptions, and unprecedented inflationary pressures. Without question, we are facing a crippling emergency.

I believe in the ongoing training of my teachers, which is why we at ACCA invest heavily in creating professional development opportunities, including apprenticeships, and in supporting teacher-child ratios and group sizes that allow educators to practice their craft in safe settings for adult and child well-being.

Across the country, the reality of the system's shoestring funding is that some teachers still earn such low wages that they rely upon food stamps to make ends meet. Often, teachers earn poverty wages even though a majority have achieved some higher education level.

Being an early childhood educator had its challenges before the pandemic, but COVID has layered additional responsibilities onto teachers, who are overburdened, underpaid, and challenged daily by doing a job where we are considered essential yet often treated as dispensable. As a sector, child care is facing the most significant staffing challenge we have ever had, as educators leave the field to get higher-paying jobs that address their families' economic security. Child care teachers are among the lowest-paid workers in America. In Virginia, the median hourly wage for a child care teacher still is \$15 or less. Not surprisingly, more than 25% of teachers exit the field each year.

Because our country has not sufficiently funded necessary support and fair compensation, programs, families, and children feel the impact of early learning educators who decide to leave the field. I cannot tell you how difficult it is to hire qualified teachers to lead ACCA classes and support our children and families through trauma, learning loss, toxic stress, food insecurity, and more.

Let me make one thing very clear. We are not babysitters. Early childhood educators are professionals responsible for day-to-day interactions that influence the developing brain architecture of children. Disparities in development begin to emerge in infancy and widen over time without consistent, nurturing care and high-quality learning opportunities provided by effective, competent, well-trained, and well-compensated educators. This is what we do at ACCA. We invest in our teachers and ensure children have equitable access to proven, quality, research-based, and developmentally appropriate learning experiences.

Make no mistake. ECE investment is a national security imperative. If America is to continue to lead the world, it needs an educated, healthy, resilient, innovative, and competitive labor force. This begins with the youngest among us.

At least 70% of Americans between ages 17 and 24 are not eligible for military service due to obesity, mental health issues, drug abuse, or lack of a high school degree. Expanding the pool of qualified recruits should not only be a task for the military. Addressing childhood obesity, substance addiction, and poor academic achievement requires significant funding in our education and public health systems. This must include investing in early education because many of the lifelong problems cited can start to be positively addressed long before children enter elementary school.

This is how early childhood education can help our military readiness. American national security and economic leadership and the strengthening of our democracy depend on it.

Due to the pandemic, thousands of us have risked our lives to serve young children and working families. From our perspective, all we ask for is the financial support and bipartisan will to give our youngest ones a real opportunity at the American Dream. Likewise, families need an overhauled early learning ecosystem that provides quality and fair access to early education and prepares children for lifelong success. Also, tuition needs to be affordable, programs high-quality, and the system should work for all, especially underserved working families.

Without relief and stabilization funds, we would never have survived the pandemic. Child care relief funding has kept ACCA and many other programs from going under, but we are fearful for the future. We—and by “we” I mean small child care centers and large child care centers, for profit and nonprofit programs, faith-based programs, and family child care centers alike—do not want to go back to the challenges of the past—we want to be part of the effort to build a child care system that will work for our children, our families, our staff, and the businesses in our community that rely on us.

In my mind, our child care system is a cake; too often, we have tried to pretend that we can use three eggs for baking a cake that the recipe says takes ten eggs, and then we have been surprised when the cake does not come out the way it should. It makes no sense for our nation to put so few eggs (or so little money) into child care such that educators are paid such low wages and offered minimal benefits while parents cannot afford to access it. Reconciliation allows us to get so much closer to providing the ten eggs we need. Here is what those eggs would lead to:

- 1) Funding that covers the cost of care, which includes fair compensation for the skilled, valuable, and essential work of our early childhood educators,
- 2) Options for families to be able to choose quality child care options in ways that provide stability for them, for their children, and us,
- 3) Alignment between child care and early learning, where centers, homes, and schools support working families and support children’s positive growth and development.

Child care is a lifeline to our families, and early childhood educators are essential. I urge you to support us by building on relief that has allowed us to keep going and providing substantial and sustained investments through reconciliation to rebuild and strengthen child care programs like ACCA so we can support parents and children.

Thank you for listening to my story, and I look forward to your questions.