



COVID-19

URNS

CHILD CARE

FROM

Challenge to Crisis

When the School District of Amery surveyed the demand for a district-run, child-care center in 2015, it wasn't surprised to find itself in a child-care desert. They opened a center that fall and, within a few months, a waitlist formed in this small district about 70 miles northwest of Eau Claire.

Even in a normal year, about half of Wisconsinites — 70% of those in rural areas — live in a child-care desert. This is not a normal year.

Many districts cannot open safely due to the pandemic and are protecting their students, families and staff by delaying their physical re-opening or opening part-time.

This is virtually certain to exacerbate the state's child-care shortage, says Ruth Schmidt, executive director of the Wisconsin Early Childhood Association.

Moreover, many child-care providers have closed or lost capacity. As of early August, Wisconsin's open

child-care programs are operating at 25% to 50% of capacity.

Even where child-care capacity exists, working families living in districts that aren't re-opening will face new costs.

"It is hard to imagine a more catastrophic situation," Schmidt says.

School districts did not cause the coming child-care crisis, but they can be part of the solution.

"The very first thing that I honestly believe every district should be

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doing is sitting down and having conversations with the child-care programs in their community,” Schmidt says. “School districts need to know what’s available and how their decisions affect capacity of care in their communities.”

The loss of child-care capacity and increased demand would stress a healthy system. It may do worse to an ailing one.

■ A fragile industry

Especially in rural areas, the child-care industry’s razor-thin margins even before the pandemic had pushed many providers out of business, Schmidt says. This is a big part of why more than two in three rural Wisconsinites live in a child-care desert.

“In the last decade alone, Wisconsin lost 9% of our group child care and 70% of our family child-care programs,” she says. When COVID-19 hit Wisconsin, child-care providers were recognized as a vital link for children of essential workers.

But the pandemic also punished a fragile industry.

Parents now working from home

opted to keep their children safe there, Schmidt says, while parents furloughed or newly unemployed due to business closures opted to keep their children home as well.

“Operating at 25% or even 50% of capacity serving families of essential workers was just not sustainable,” she says.

The outlook is little improved.

A survey from the National Association for the Education of Young Children, released July 13 in “Holding on Until Help Comes,” suggests that 80% of the nation’s regulated child-care capacity could be gone within a year.

Low- and medium-income families, already worst-hit by the pandemic, will be most challenged at the prospect of spending more on child care.

“A typical family of four with two kids in care spends close to half its household income on child care,” Schmidt says, and adding costs for school-age children may be untenable for many families.

In mid-August, Wisconsin’s child-care subsidy program, Wisconsin Shares, received authorization to pay

for child care during the day for school-aged children receiving virtual instruction.

These payments can also be authorized when parents work from home. Schmidt says this flexibility, though important, could raise other questions. Will there be enough funding for infants and toddlers if classrooms are filled with school-age students during the day? Will there be enough capacity?

Even in normalcy, child-care availability is important to a district. Now, with reopening in doubt in districts across Wisconsin, that connection will be front and center. The challenges are complex.

For many districts, reopening schools this fall will be less like flicking a switch and more like adjusting a dimmer. Even schools that are open will be taking steps to mitigate spread of the virus.

“It is likely that schools will need to move between all virtual learning, in-person or a hybrid approach depending on emergent COVID-19 challenges,” Schmidt says.

In many communities, young





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students ages 5 through 12 will not be in classrooms. Meanwhile, child-care availability will be limited and, in many communities, it may simply not exist.

The long-standing lack of child care has led many districts to step in and fill this void in recent years.

■ Planting an oasis

Wisconsin school districts operate more than 180 child-care centers. Most of them serve children at least three or four years old, though many also accept infants and toddlers.

District officials in Amery and Wausauke, a town of about 600 in northeast Wisconsin, had similar advice for districts considering opening their own child-care operations.

In both cases, they put a team together that visited other in-school child-care operations. Though neither district runs a profit, they both say it's been a worthwhile endeavor.

Wausauke started its center in part because a lack of local child care had become an enrollment issue. Parents who had to drive to nearby towns for child care had found it more convenient to enroll their children there, district superintendent Jared Deschane says.

"My advice would be that it works and it's a viable option if you have space in a building," says Deschane.

Nina Hutton, director of the Clubhouse Childcare Center in Amery, recommends finding staff who understand child care, including licensing requirements.

"I do believe having child care in the school is a huge benefit to the

community as a whole," she says.

It also helps prepare children for life as a student, easing the transition from child care to school.

Like many rural districts, Amery and Wausauke are planning on opening for in-person schooling this fall. Still, COVID-19 will present new challenges. Amery will be overcoming logistical hurdles amid the social distancing measures that accompany the pandemic.

"I'm struggling to find staff," says Hutton. They'll have to use more space, too.

Even though they operate child-care centers, both districts said child-care challenges factored into their decision-making process around re-opening.

Hutton says Amery couldn't have offered care to school-age children because they don't have space.

Deschane says Wausauke parents would have truly struggled to find child care. Their own operation, likewise, couldn't fill that entire gap.

"We had that discussion in March, that 'Oh my, gosh, do we leave daycare open?'" he says. "There was a fear that we'd have an influx of kids in daycare."

Many districts pay for child care — either at their own centers or with a partner — using Fund 80, a community development fund exempt from revenue limits. To levy for this fund next year, though, districts would have to include it in a budget, hold a hearing and approve it — all by Nov. 1.

This option might work best in cases where there are few or no child-care alternatives nearby. Opening your own child-care center isn't the only solution. Even some of those districts that use Fund 80 contract with outside providers instead of having child care in their schools. Schmidt outlines five other models.

■ Collaborative solutions

As of early August, state and federal relief, while welcomed, isn't meeting the education and child-care needs of the state's children.

"But there are many big and small models for effective collaboration," Schmidt says, such as:

- **4K models:** In the world of 4K, we know of many districts using community approaches for the delivery of 4K services. There are districts who use community approaches in part because they know robust early education in their communities is vital to the stability of their district's enrollment.
- **Broad community partnerships:** In several areas of the state, community partners including schools, early-care providers, workforce and economic development leaders, county and municipal government, business and philanthropy have been coming together to work on solutions ranging from starting a new early-learning program with creative financing solutions to launching shared service supports for child care.
- **Child-care innovations:** There are multiple examples of child-care programs that have, or are planning to, bring school-age siblings of children already enrolled in their programs in for virtual learning support. The challenge of these models is that parents will need to pay out of pocket for the care, thus making this an option primarily for families with means. One program is hiring a state-licensed kindergarten teacher to run a K-2 classroom to support virtual learning, paid for by parents but with full support of the school district.

■ **Out-of-school-time care:** Community-based, out-of-school-time programs are exploring ways to provide safe spaces for virtual learning for students in need in partnership or in collaboration with school districts. A primary focus for this work is finding ways to cover the cost of this option for low-income families.

■ **School/child-care collaborative virtual learning:** This type of model could be a licensed child-care or school-age program providing full-day care, including virtual learning support, directly in a school building. In this type of



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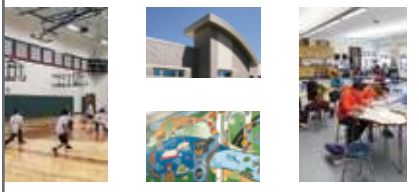
model, a school could provide space, food, cleaning, transportation and educational assistants while the child-care program would provide a full-time child-care teacher in the classroom for wraparound care.

One of the few certainties this fall is that parents will need more child-care options when they are least able to pay for them.

“In Wisconsin’s history, every time we’ve needed an increase in the Wisconsin Shares subsidy budget, our Legislature has done that,” Schmidt says, but the state will have its own extraordinary challenges.

When it comes to funding, it’s not clear whether more state subsidies or district tuition sharing will fill the gap. Schmidt is sure about one thing.

“There has to be a way to pay for this that is not just on the backs of parents.” ■



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