

PRESS RELEASE

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Advocates Share Solutions to Increase Access to Affordable Childcare

Policy recommendations to promote teacher retention and reduce costs for families will be shared at upcoming Mississippi Senate Hearings on the needs of women, children, and families.

JACKSON, MS - On October 25th and 26th, the Mississippi Senate Study Group on Women, Children and Families will hold their second set of public meetings to hear from expert speakers on how the state can best support families. The study group, chaired by Senator Nicole Boyd, was appointed by Lt. Governor Delbert Hosemann in the wake of the Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization Supreme Court decision. The lawmakers are tasked with making legislative recommendations related to families and young children from birth to 3 years old. They held their first two hearings in late September, which focused on maternal and child healthcare, adoption, foster care, and child support.

The study group's next hearing, on October 25th, will focus on childcare availability. The Mississippi Early Learning Alliance (MELA), the University of Mississippi's Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning and other early education professionals across the state have been working together to gather data and community input on policies that could immediately help make childcare more accessible across the state.

Dr. Cathy Grace, co-director of the Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning will be speaking at the October 25th hearing, and she expressed her appreciation for the study group's approach. "These hearings represent an opportunity to craft policies that are rooted in data and reflective of community voices. We are grateful to be given a platform to elevate the experiences and concerns of families and childcare professionals in our state, and to share data-informed solutions."

These partners have identified four policies that could help make childcare more consistently available and affordable to all working parents, and incentivize childcare teachers to remain in the field:

- Promote childcare teacher retention through a voluntary wage supplement program funded through unallocated/unencumbered state dollars, such as excess lottery funds.
- Remove the child support requirement from the Child Care Payment Program application.
- Reduce the overall cost of childcare for families through a refundable Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit.
- Transfer the maximum amount of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) dollars allowed to increase funding to childcare assistance for eligible families.

"Childcare is a workforce issue. Parents and caregivers need childcare to go to work or school, and speaking from personal experience, if it costs a large portion of their income, it is not sustainable," said MELA's Interim Executive Director, Biz Harris. "But we've heard from childcare program directors across the state that they don't have enough staff to operate at full capacity, which means fewer spots for children. They have also told us that many qualified, passionate teachers are leaving for better paying jobs in the service industry or elsewhere. This puts directors in an impossible position as small business owners, because they know that their customers - the families in their communities - can't afford to pay more for the essential service they provide. It's an issue that's been present for years, but it's been exacerbated in the years since COVID-19 began."

Childcare workers in Mississippi make an average of \$19,490 annually, typically with no benefits. This is less than the average income for dishwashers and cashiers, and less than half the annual income of most prekindergarten teachers (\$42,952). Five other states have successfully encouraged teacher retention by offering a wage supplement for childcare workers that gets their pay closer to early educators in school-based settings. MELA and partners will recommend that Mississippi invest excess state lottery funds or other unallocated state funds in a wage supplement program that encourages childcare educators to remain in their jobs and to pursue educational opportunities and certifications to help them best support children during the critical early years.

Cost is another barrier families face in getting the childcare they need. Despite low teacher wages, childcare remains unaffordable for many families in Mississippi. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, childcare is considered affordable if it costs families no more than 7% of their income. In Mississippi, the average cost of infant care is \$5,436 per year for one child, nearly 12% of the median household income. These costs go up when families have more than one child. Care for an infant and a 4-year-old, for example, costs an average of \$10,220 per year - or almost a quarter (22%) of the median household income.

The Child Care Payment Program (CCPP), funded through the federal Child Care Development Block Grant, exists to help make childcare more affordable for working parents with the fewest resources. Increasing access to this program and ensuring that all eligible caregivers can fully participate will help parents get the childcare they need to remain in the workforce.

But while the Child Care Payment Program is a critical support for thousands of working parents in Mississippi, many do not meet the income requirements for CCPP assistance and are still paying more than 7% of their income on childcare. “Mississippi can bolster the economic stability of working families by creating a refundable Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit,” Harris said. “With these types of credits, families might receive up to 50% of what they spend for childcare back as a tax credit or refund. Many working parents are trying to choose between two bad options: losing paychecks or using a huge portion of those paychecks just to cover childcare. These tax credits could help working Mississippians increase their buying power and incentivize parents to remain in the workforce.”

More information about these policy recommendations can be found on the Mississippi Early Learning Alliance’s website, MSEarlyLearning.org. The hearings will be open to the public and webcast and archived on the Mississippi Legislature’s YouTube channel (youtube.com/c/MississippiLegislature). The public is invited to email written testimony to WCFStudyGroup@senate.ms.gov. Comments will be presented to the full committee.

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Mississippi Early Learning Alliance (MELA)

MELA was founded in 2019 to drive collective efforts in Mississippi to design an early care and education system that works better for everyone: childcare providers, families, employers, other early childhood professionals, and our children. MELA is working to build and leverage a powerful network of professionals, advocates and community members to achieve a common goal: *By 2030, Mississippi will have a state-of-the-art childcare system, fueled by robust data, cross-sector collaboration, and resources.* In addition to MELA’s long-term collective impact efforts, they work to meet immediate needs through curated communications and information-sharing, ad-hoc support for childcare provider-led initiatives, and programs such as a shared services platform for childcare providers, MSEarlyLearningResources.org, and the *Leading from Strength* Empowerment Network for Women of Color.