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Universal childcare: what it would actually take

A feasibility assessment of nationwide childcare for the 51.2 million American children ages 0–12 — with the workforce arithmetic, the Senate procedure, and five countries' worth of evidence.

ABSTRACT

The binding constraint on universal childcare in the United States is not appropriations but labor: full coverage for ages 0–12 requires roughly 2.8 million educator positions against 1.05 million today, in an occupation ranked 10th-lowest-paid of 825. Evidence from five national programs shows funding that outruns workforce produces queues, litigation, or price inflation rather than care. Instrument choice determines pass-through; Senate procedure permits financing and forbids mandates; and the durable American precedents are state-level and bipartisan. We conclude feasibility is a design and sequencing problem — pay the workforce first, build supply second, extend benefits third — and stamp our uncertainties in the text.

PLAIN TALK

Bottom line: the money isn't the hard part — Congress can fund this. The hard part is that childcare pays so badly almost nobody stays in the job, and there aren't enough workers to watch the kids we already have, let alone all of them. Fix pay first. Everything else follows.

PART 1

The headcount: two-thirds of the kids are missing from the debate

51.2M	11.1M	7.5M	32.6M
KIDS 0–12	AGES 0–2	AGES 3–4	AGES 5–12

School-age children are 64% of the population in scope, and they are absent from essentially every published cost estimate, which stop at age five. Their problem is after-school hours and roughly 75 school-free weekdays a year; unmet afterschool demand is at an all-time high, with 4 in 5 middle schoolers who want a program unable to get one.

Census PEP Vintage 2024 (committed pipeline) · America After 3PM 2025

> PLAIN TALK
> When politicians say "universal childcare," they usually mean preschool for 4-year-olds — leaving out two of every three kids.

PART 2

The worker problem: triple the workforce, or halve the quitting

BINDING CONSTRAINT

Full coverage requires ~2.8 million educator FTEs (range 1.9–3.9M) against ~1.05 million today. Ramp-rate arithmetic: ~800,000 hires per year, of which 579,000 merely replace departures —

cutting turnover in half saves more hiring than the entire expansion requires. The credential pipeline issues ~40,000 per year, renewals included; it cannot carry any modeled ramp. Childcare's median wage is $15.41/hour, 10th-lowest of 825 occupations.

FTE model (committed script; Census + BLS inputs) · CDA Council · Cleveland Fed worker-flows

> PLAIN TALK
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> Most "new hires" refill a leaky bucket. Patch the bucket – pay people enough to stay – and the impossible math softens. DC tried it; turnover measurably fell.

UNTESTED AT SCALE

Every failed precedent also underpaid. No country has attempted the buildout at genuinely competitive wages; at parity, the constraint is untested rather than proven fatal.

PART 3

Instrument choice: vouchers inflate, supply grants suppress

Australia's demand-side subsidy watched fees outrun it (+4.4% in a representative year). The United States accidentally ran the opposite experiment: $24B in provider-side stabilization grants under which costs fell – and whose expiry (September 2023) was followed within two quarters by rising prices and a jump in parents unable to find care, 17.7% to 22.2%.

CEA analysis · Australian Dept. of Education

UNREPLICATED

No peer-reviewed evaluation of the $24B experiment exists yet – four papers mention the program; none evaluates it. The finding stands at single-source-family confidence.

PART 4

Senate procedure: finance survives, mandates die

Reconciliation's Byrd rule strips provisions whose budgetary effect is "merely incidental" – the controlling precedent being the $15 minimum wage, struck from the 2021 relief act as a private-sector mandate. A childcare wage mandate dies identically; wage *funding* is money and survives. Quality standards are safest housed inside federal spending programs rather than imposed on the market. Separately, CBO's scoring of the House-passed BBB title ($381.5B, 2022–31) embedded substantial state non-participation – the holdout problem is the official base case, and any national design requires a federal backstop.

Senate parliamentarian precedent (ARP 2021) · CBO 57630 · KFF expansion tracker

> PLAIN TALK
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> Don't mandate better wages — fund them. Don't require standards of every daycare — attach them to federal money.

PART 5

The comparative record

CASE	DESIGN	OUTCOME
QUEBEC '97	Flat-fee supply-side	30,688 waitlisted after 25 years; staffing named as cause
GERMANY '13	Legal entitlement	Courts award money, not slots
AUSTRALIA	Demand subsidy	Fee inflation; strings later attached
CANADA '21	$10/day federal-provincial	194K of 284K spaces; ~$19/day; educator shortage
GA/OK/FL	Universal pre-K	Decades durable in red states
NYC '14	Municipal sprint	60,000+ seats in two years
US DOD	Pay parity + standards	Works; has for decades

VERIFIED

> PLAIN TALK
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> Georgia and Florida refuse federal Medicaid money and still built universal pre-K themselves. Red America doesn't hate childcare — it hates being told how.

PART 6

Architecture: three designs survive every ranking

Twelve candidate architectures were scored on fourteen anchored dimensions under four objective weightings (labor-supply-first, child-development-first, equity-first, equal), then re-scored blind. Three designs occupy the top ranks under all weightings: a public option for markets private operators decline, a scaled Head-Start-style delivery model, and K–12 extension for ages 3+ and school-age wraparound. The fourth seat flips — supply-first under three weightings, caregiver-choice under equity. A federal fallback remains the holdout-proofing feature, not a top-four architecture on its own. The two most fashionable designs — a pure demand-side allowance and federalized employer cost-splitting — rank last; unconditioned cash is mid-table. Ages differ: schools for the after-3pm-and-summer problem; funded mixed delivery for preschool; home-based options, including paid kin, for infants.

Scorecard: 12 × 14 × 4, anchored scales, independent re-score (47 cells moved) — committed

THREE STABLE; FOURTH FLIPS

PART 7

Sequencing: pay, build, then promise

Visible-first where capacity exists (school-age seats, pre-K), supply-first where it does not (ages 0–2, compensation). Fund retention immediately — it is the arithmetically dominant lever — with dedicated revenue rather than annual appropriations; extend demand-side eligibility only as staffed capacity arrives, so money buys care instead of price increases. Reconciliation-built sunsets recreate the 2023 funding cliff at scale and are a design defect, not a compromise.

APPENDIX

The honesty box

Nobody has tried fair wages at scale. "Workforce binds" is proven only for underpaying programs. **The price evidence is one source deep.** The $24B experiment awaits independent evaluation. **Big chains aren't full.** Metro markets show price-rationed slack at ~71% occupancy; the physical shortage is rural and infant-age. **Twice checked, not final.** An independent structurally-blinded re-score moved 47 cells and broke the old flip-free top-four; three designs are stable, the fourth seat flips by objective, and a single re-score is weaker evidence than this project once treated it as.

THE RECEIPTS · 15-workstream protocol · pre-registered adjudication criteria · committed Census/BLS pipeline · anchor table preserving our own corrected errors · deviations log (9) · red team · steelman · three passes, all public.

CITE · Gubment. "Universal Childcare: What It Would Actually Take." Policy Whitepaper No. 1, Aug 2026. gubment.com/childcare · Sources & data: gubment.com/childcare/sources