

THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Doing right by Arizona's kids

The Issue: Child-Care Subsidies

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If this were a race to the bottom, we'd cheer.

- Arizona came in 37th nationally in a ranking of child-care centers by the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies.
- According to a report by the National Women's Law Center, only four other states are as stingy as Arizona when it comes to child-care subsidies for working poor families. The amount Arizona gives these poor parents is based on what child care cost in 2000.

Today, it costs \$4,400 to \$8,600 a year per child at a licensed center, according to the Children's Action Alliance.

That can be a big chunk of a low-wage paycheck. Parents who qualify for a state subsidy have a co-pay based on their income. But because subsidies are based on 7-year-old cost figures, parents have to find a bargain-basement child-care provider.

In this way, the low state subsidy rate creates a demand for low-cost, low-quality care.

When it comes to caring for infants and children, the things that provide for real quality and stability cost money. Consider the child-care worker: Pay and benefits are low so that turn over is high. This means the person a toddler learned to trust yesterday may be gone tomorrow. That matters.

Providing good staff-to-child ratios – Arizona's exceed recommendations from the National Association for the Education of Young Children – offering high-quality materials for the children, reducing group size and employing well trained teachers are all considered key to good-quality child care. All are expensive.

None are frills.

Higher child-care subsidies would give parents more choice and pump more money into a cash-strapped system, improving overall quality.

Gov. Janet Napolitano's budget does not include increasing subsidy rates. Several bills in the Legislature would raise the subsidy, and Sen. Carolyn Allen, R-Scottsdale, and Rep. Linda Lopez, D-Tuscon, deserve credit for remembering the littlest Arizonans.

Yet an appropriations subcommittee recently voted to reduce the eligibility for child-care subsidies. This would throw 2,200 children off the rolls, according to the rolls, according to the Arizona Child Care Association. The subcommittee also wants to impose a two-year limit on receiving subsidies.

This only makes sense if Arizona is seeking the distinction of "Worst in the Nation."

If lawmakers want to do right by Arizona's children – and look good to all those corporations in search of a national headquarters – they should make an increasing the subsidy a priority as they work through the appropriations process.